

**THE RESCUE OF SABER 6**  
**By Johnnie B. Hitt (Rattler 3)**

March 17, 1970 somewhere from the helicopter skies near Chu Lai, Viet Nam; "Chu Lai GCA this is Skater 67, descending to 1500..." The airways went silent. The helicopter blades no longer whipped the air into submission. That high frequency turbine engine whine that deafens all helicopter pilots was no more. The machine was now quiet but the jungle was not. The birds and animals were fleeing frantically from their normally quiet homes in the jungle canopy. They were desperately trying to escape from the uncontrolled rolling mass of what was once a flying UH-1H IROQUIS helicopter.

"Skater 67, this is Chu Lai GCA, say your intentions, over." Pause...Silence..."Skater 67, this is Chu Lai GCA, please say intentions, over." Silence..."Any aircraft, this is Chu Lai GCA, do you have contact with Skater 67? Over." Pause...The Ground Controlled Radar (GCA) operator at the Chu Lai airfield was a seasoned Air Force veteran who knew he had a problem. With the known deteriorating weather conditions in the entire AO (area of operation), it was not a good time to lose contact with any helicopter but especially not this one. The controller knew from somewhere in the back of his mind that this call sign was familiar. He didn't know who it was but he did know the call sign was special.

"Chu Lai Tower, this is GCA." "Tower..." "This is GCA, lost radio contact with Skater 67 at 1559 (3:59 P.M.) local time. Do you have a strip on him?" A "strip" is Air Traffic Controller (ATC) talk for a small strip of white paper with abbreviated information from the flight plan. Each crew was required to file a complete flight plan with their company operations or the Chu Lai airfield operations. "This is tower, yes we have it! That aircraft is carrying a code 5, that's why we have it." A "code" is ATC language for the passenger being the rank of Major General of equivalent. The ATC coding systems starts with the President of the United States (or any other head-of-state) as a code 1, vice president as code 2, General (four star) as code 3, Lieutenant General (three star) as a 4, etc. The code systems goes to Colonel rank which is a code 7.

"Skater 67, this is Chu Lai tower, over." Long pause..."Skater 67, this is..." The tower controller attempted to make contact with Skater 67 several times but was unsuccessful. Without delay, he picked up the crash rescue line which alerted all of the operations centers throughout Chu Lai. This immediate action taken by the Air Force ATC controller and the tower operator began a sequence of professionally executed and heroic events. These actions would be executed to perfection by a team of Army and Air Force professionals who had the brotherhood of war as their primary motivation.

The 71st Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) Headquarters was located on the South China Sea beach in Chu Lai about two miles south of the Chu Lai East runway. This assault company was better known for their Rattler and Firebird call signs. Rattler call signs were used by the "slick driver" or the UH-1H (Iroquois) helicopter pilots who few missions which included command and control (C&C), re-supply of the 23rd Infantry Division (better known as the Americal Division) soldiers, medivac (medical evacuation) and combat assaults. The pilots of the infamous helicopter gun platoon of the 71st were known throughout the Division AO by the call sign Firebird. This small but lethal platoon of UH-1C (Charlie Model) gun ships were the best and most responsive team to ever support the American soldier. Chu Lai air base complex consisted of two roughly parallel runways oriented generally north (320 degrees) and south (140 degrees). Chu Lai West runway was located furthest west from the beach while Chu Lai East which was basically a heliport (700 feet x 200 feet) was only a few hundred yards inland from the ocean. The Air Force and Army jointly operated the entire facility but the US. Air Force fast movers (jets) launched and recovered exclusively from Chu Lai West. This left Chu Lai East solely for helicopters.

The 71st AHC operations was located adjacent to Chu Lai East. Collocated with operations was aircraft maintenance, the Firebird alert hooch where crews were on 24 hour standby and the flight line which was respectfully known as the snake pit. Of course, the maintenance crews' call sign was Snake Doctor, what else?

Within the operations building, a communications center was manned by Specialist Fifth Class Roger H. Doyea from Tacoma, Washington. The air-to-air communications suite consisted of one FM and one UHF radio. A lonely black dial telephone sat on the operations desk. Next to it was a TA-312 field telephone connected to the Firebirds.

Specialist Doyea answers the black phone on the first ring, "Rattler operations" "Yes, Captain Hitt is here, just a minute." "Sir, its for you, Battalion" "Hello, this is Captain Hitt." Captain Johnnie B. Hitt (Rattler 3) from Wills

Point, Texas is the company operations officer with about 7 months of his 12 month tour complete. "I understand sir and we will comply, out!" Captain Hitt picks up the phone and from memory quickly dials the Company Commander's number. "Major James!" was the immediate response.

Major Tommie P. James (Rattler 6) was 34 and hailed from Bixby, Oklahoma. He had successfully commanded the company for four months but his biggest challenge was yet to come. James had been flying in Vietnam since he arrived in July, 1969. "Sir, this is Captain Hitt." Tommy James knew that Captain Hitt's calls were usually not social. "Sir, we have a helicopter down but it is not one of ours. Battalion was notified by the tower and suspects the downed chopper is carrying a general officer. Battalion commander requests you proceed to the area and coordinate the search and rescue (S & R) operations. I'll have a bird and crew ready to go when you get here. I'll try to get more detail." James responded simply, "Roger out." Captain Hitt immediately phoned maintenance while simultaneously giving Doyea details of which crew members to alert for an immediate mission. "Jim this is Johnnie, what bird do you have ready for an immediate takeoff for the old man? We have a bird down, but it's not ours!" "You can have 69-23248, I'll get it ready." "Thanks."

Captain James (Jim) Duke (call sign-snake doctor) from Dallas, Texas and his maintenance crew always had one more helicopter available when the chips were down. They had the best maintenance record of any company in the Battalion. Even if 80% or 90% of the company's fleet of 22 UH-1H's was committed, Rattler maintenance always had one more to fly and they could produce it immediately when a life was at stake.

Jim Duke and Johnnie Hitt had a special relationship that few people get a chance to experience and most hope they never do. While under intense enemy fire, Jim risked his life to land and rescued Johnnie and his crew after they were shot down and crashed in the rice patties not too far from Chu Lai. When Jim called Johnnie or vice versa there was no questioning of what was being asked. There was an understanding you can have only when you have saved a fellow soldier's life.

This short story is only an example of what went on daily in the 71st AHC. The dependence on the professionalism, bravery, and confidence of every member of the company was never questioned and never failed. Every soldier did their job and took care of each other. When someone was in trouble, he was never alone. Fellow Rattlers would be there.

Captain Hitt's next call was to the Firebirds. "This is operations. Aircraft down. Not ours. Six is going out to C & C the search and rescue. Heads up. Do not crank. Want to conserve fuel. Will reposition you when I get a general location." Firebirds, "Roger, out!"

Black phone again. "Battalion, this is Rattler operations. Do you have a general location yet based on the flight plan?" "Best guess is that he is down somewhere near Tam Ky." "Roger, Rattler 6 will be airborne in 10 minutes. Will keep you informed. Out!" "Johnnie?" "Yes." "We are pretty sure that Saber 6, the Division Commanding General, is on that helicopter!" A long pause ensued. "Thanks, operations out!" Captain Hitt put down the phone and stood motionless. It was like someone had tied weights to his legs. He wanted to move and continue the frantic pace necessary to launch an aircraft quickly but he couldn't. The division commander. That is a two star general in charge of the entire Americal Division.

Indeed the Division Commander was a major general (two star) and he was the sole individual in charge of the 23rd Infantry Division. Major General Lloyd B. Ramsey assumed command of the division in June of 1969 just two short years after the division was activated in Viet Nam on the 25th of September 1967. It was the largest division in Viet Nam. Most divisions consisted of nine maneuver battalions but the Americal had 10. Those battalions were distributed three each in the 11th and 198th Infantry Brigades and four to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. General Ramsey had been visiting this brigade. The 71st AHC habitually supported the 196th although they did combat assault missions throughout the AO as part of the 14th Aviation Battalion. The 14th was responsible for providing combat aviation support throughout the division sector. The 14th battalion commander was the individual who directed Rattler 6 to take charge of the search and rescue. The Commanding General (CG) was not flying one of the battalion's helicopters but there were indications that he was down in their territory. The CG's command and control helicopter was provided by A Company, 123rd Aviation Battalion (Airmobile). This battalion provided all general support aviation to the division.

On the day of the crash MG Ramsey had been on a series of visits to the infantry battalions in the field. He had departed Fire Support Base (FSB) Center enroute to Hawk Hill. He was flying with a substitute Aircraft Commander (AC), Skater 67, because his regular AC had been grounded. Most pilots immediately wonder why

he was grounded because just the use of the word generates a negative connotation. The flight surgeon in this case directed the grounding because he had flown seven days in a row without the proper rest. A regulatory amount of crew rest is mandated for all crew members. MG Ramsey was quite comfortable with Skater 67 and toward the end of the day had complete confidence in his flying ability. The CG had a meeting at division headquarters in Chu Lai which he was trying desperately to make on time. He had to stop at FSB Hawk Hill to briefly visit a battalion commander. Aviation fuel was readily available at this FSB but not at others. Hawk Hill was a staging area for the Firebirds. The Firebirds maintained a 24 hour crew at Hawk Hill. This forward positioning cut the reaction time to support the infantry by at least 30 minutes. General Ramsey knew fuel was available but specifically instructed his crew not to refuel the helicopter. Normally the CG mandated that the chopper be topped off (refueled) at every stop where fuel was available. He was in a hurry to get to his meeting so he did not want to wait for the refueling operation. This decision resulted in the helicopter having almost empty fuel tanks by the time it arrived in the vicinity of Tam Ky.

MG Ramsey quickly met with the battalion commander and immediately proceeded to his waiting chopper. As he strapped into his large armored seat, he remembered the day, shortly after taking command of the division, his AC brought an aircraft maintenance technician over to the aircraft. The enthusiastic soldier convinced the CG that he needed an armored seat for protection. The UH-1H helicopter is outfitted with two armored seats as standard equipment, one for the AC and one for the pilot. These armored seats saved many aviators' lives but provided no protection for the passengers. Reluctantly, the CG agreed to have an armored seat installed on the right side of the cargo compartment facing forward. He had reservations about how the seat would be secured to the floor, however, the soldier persuaded him the seat would be secure and would not come loose in a crash. When he finished strapping into his seat, the helicopter immediately departed Hawk Hill for Chu Lai. The helicopter climbed to altitude slower than normal. The CG became concerned about being late for his meeting. He leaned against the seat belt across his midsection and placed the radio earphones over his head and adjusted each ear cup over one ear at a time. He then turned the FM (Frequency Modulated) radio switch to the on position. The crew had already applied power to the AN/ASC-10 command and control console securely fastened to the floor of the helicopter. The AN/ASC-10 was made up entirely of airborne radios which gave the CG a variety of radios for command and control in a relative compact area. It measured 32 1/2 inches long, 17 1/2 inches wide and 33 1/2 inches high and weighed about 280 pounds. The console was heavy, big, solid, and very unattractive but it provided the CG with FM radio contact with his division headquarters using an AN/ARC-54 FM radio. General Ramsey started to depress the push-to-talk button to transmit a message to his headquarters when the crew chief leaned over him from his position on the right side of the aircraft and behind the CG's armored seat and flipped up the aircraft UHF (ultra high frequency) radio receiver switch.

Crew Chief Ray Murphy of Connersville, Indiana was a dedicated Specialist Fourth Class and very intuitive about keeping the CG in the loop on what was happening inside and outside the aircraft. He had been doing it for a while and he took pride in making sure everything in his aircraft was in perfect condition for his CG.

Ray Murphy's action allowed the CG to monitor the crew's radio conversation. "Chu Lai weather, this is Skater 67. What is current weather in Chu Lai?" "This is Chu Lai weather, Currently 1500 feet overcast with one mile visibility outside of the clouds. Over." "This is Skater 67, roger, thanks." "Chu Lai approach control, this is Skater 67, over." "Skater 67, this is Chu Lai." "Chu Lai, Skater 67 is a UH-1, climbing to 3000 feet, request GCA." "Skater 67, say position." "This is 67, off Hawk Hill, heading 090 degrees." "Roger 67, turn right for identification." Pause..."Chu Lai GCA, this is Blue 24, west of Hawk Hill at 3100 feet, in the clouds, request GCA, over." "Blue 24, this is Chu Lai approach control, please contact Chu Lai GCA on UHF frequency 285.8, over." "This is blue 24, roger, out." "Skater 67, this is Chu Lai approach, stop turn. Radar contact west of Hawk Hill. Turn to heading 090. If you want to expedite, I can let you down over the water and you should break out at 1500 feet." "This is Skater 67, roger, we will take that procedure, over." "This is Chu Lai, maintain 090 heading and I will take you out another 2 miles so you will be 5 miles out over water." "Skater 67, Roger." The CG listened intently and he was pleased the AC chose to expedite the procedure. "Skater 67, descend to 1500 feet, call me when you are VFR." "Skater 67, Roger." The AC noted the time at 1556 and began his descent. General Ramsey along with all other passengers that ride in a helicopter when they are flying in the clouds noted how much the outside looked like the inside of a milk bottle. It was all white and seemed to be motionless. While observing the milk bottle effect out the front window of the helicopter, he noticed Robert J. Thomas of Reston, Virginia. He made a mental note that this had been a good day for the newly assigned Lieutenant Colonel.

Suddenly, out the front windscreen, the CG first saw light, then green, then trees. All of this happened in moments. At the same time Chief Warrant Officer two Stephen C. Pike (Skater 67) yelled, "Trees!" He decelerated the helicopter by swiftly pulling the cyclic back into his gut...too late! The tail rotor caught the trees and the helicopter mushoomed into the jungle canopy separating the tail rotor and then the complete tail boom

as the forward force carried the disintegrating chopper into the side of the mountain. The impact continued through the canopy and into the mountain. One of the two rotor blades struck the upside of the mountain while the blade was traveling toward the tail of the aircraft. The sudden stop of the rotor blade, traveling at 324 revolutions per minute, ripped the transmission out of its support and flung it into the living space of the passenger compartment brining the engine with it. This mass of heavy components killed Specialist Murphy as he sat in his crew chief seat. The flying hunk of metals tore through the back of the passenger seats and bounced off the CG's armored seat continued around the seat and crashed forward. The mass continued its forward motion from the outside in killing LTC Thomas as it crushed him into the command and control console. The armored seat had saved General Ramsey's life but it could not prevent the resulting serious injuries. He was knocked unconscious during the crash and would remain so almost throughout his rescue.

Deathly quite followed. The breaking of Plexiglas, tearing of sheet metal, and the continuous whine of the turbine engine were no more. Wreckage, crew members and passengers, were scattered everywhere. Dazed and hurt, the survivors struggled to assess what had happened and, more importantly, the current situation? Enemy territory..did they hear us crash? Will they come for use? Who is alive? Who can fight? What do we have to fight with? Captain John P. Tucker from Lima, Ohio felt for his .45 caliber pistol. The action was more out of habit than intention. Little did he realize that out of the two M-60 machine guns which were mounted as door guns, four M-16 rifles, and various hand guns, his .45 was the only weapon recovered. The remaining arsenal was somewhere in the twisted wreckage, in the jungle canopy, in the valley below or on the jungle floor. Wherever the weapons were located, they could not be immediately found by the shocked and wounded crew and passengers. No time to worry about it. How do we get out of here?

The weather continued to deteriorate as Rattler 6 hovered onto Chu Lai East. "Rattler operations, this is Rattler 6, taxing, will be off in two minutes. Any update?" "Six, this is Rattler operations, nothing new. Plan on Tam Ky. Tell me when you want the Firebirds, over." "Six, roger, out." James hovered the UH-1 as though it was molded around him like a custom fit suit. As James prepared to take the active for takeoff, he responded with an affirmative as he executed each maneuver. He could see the bad weather and wanted to make sure that everything worked if he needed to fly in the clouds. Even though this took precious time, it was better to be sure than to have another UH-1 and crew crashed on a mountain. After a very short run-up and obtaining clearance from the tower, Rattler 6 and his crew were off on what would become one of the biggest challenges of their lives.

Tam Ky was located about 20 nautical miles (NM) northwest of Chu Lai. James turned to a heading of 130 degrees which would place him about halfway between Hawk Hill and Tam Ky. Hawk Hill was 26 NM from Chu Lai on a heading of 122. East of Tam Ky was flat land and then the coast. The mountainous terrain started just west of Tam Ky. The weather was going down so the intent was to make sure he had Hawk Hill on the left for reference and Tam Ky on the right. Closer to Tam Ky he would turn east toward the hamlet. This plan would provide for the most coverage of the suspected crash site area. It would also allow for maintaining a good visual reference by using known land marks while trying to stay oriented in the terrible weather conditions. The cloud ceiling continued to come down.

His plan worked. About 3 NM southeast prior to reaching Tam Ky, Rattler 6 began receiving a beeper single on the UHF emergency frequency 243.0. Skater 67 was transmitting the emergency signal using his AN/URC-68 survival radio. The URC-68 is a compact, personal emergency transceiver that provides two-way, ground-to-ground or ground-to-air communications. It is compact and lightweight (32 oz) and slightly larger than a can of pipe tobacco. It is very convenient to carry and easy to operate. The radio, not like the weapons, was tucked neatly into Skater 67's flight suit. His only link to rescuers was the radio. This small but vital radio is invaluable to the aviator when all two-way radio capability is destroyed in a crash.

Skater 67 was operating the radio in the "G" (Guard) position which meant that a beeper signal was automatically transmitted on the emergency frequency. In this selected channel position, Skater 67 could hear but could not transmit by voice. When Rattler 6 heard the beeper, he turned his UHF radio selector switch to the preset guard channel thereby enabling him to transmit voice by using the push-to-talk button on his cyclic control hand grip. He immediately pushed the button and transmitted "Beeper, Beeper, come up voice!" These are the international words used to signal a distressed caller to switch his radio to voice transmission. It is also the sweetest sound you can ever hear. Skater 67 immediately switched the radio control knob to the "PPT" position which stands for push-to-talk. "any aircraft this is Skater 6.." His voice faded out as Rattler 6 made a turn to avoid the ever menacing clouds that were now almost surrounding him. He had to fly the helicopter, give directions to the crew, and try to establish radio contact while staying clear of the clouds. The cockpit got real busy. Six's crew was assisting every second by doing their job and responding to their CO (commanding officer). "Skater 6, this is Rattler 6, over." "This is Skater 62, over." At least that is what Rattler 6 thought he

heard. "Skater 62, this is Rattler, do you know your approximate location? Over." "This is Skater 67, believe we are near LZ Pineapple, over" "Roger Skater 67, this is 6, stand-by."

By this time, the Joint Rescue Command and control (JRCC) element, responsible for search and rescue operations throughout Southeast Asia, from the 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group (ARRGP) (USAF) had been alerted. One of the Group's HC-130 aircraft was on station and close enough to monitor the emergency transmissions. At least one and usually two of the HC-130 aircraft were in the air at all times and went by the call sign "King." King 6 was the call sign on this particular day. In addition, one USAF Forward Air Controller (FAC) was on station and went by call sign Jake. Jake was under the command and control of King 6.

Rattler 6 informed King 6 of the message from Skater 67 while heading toward LZ Pineapple. On entering the valley that runs east and west just north of LZ Pineapple, the signal from Skater 67 became stronger as he proceeded up the valley in a westerly direction. The signal began to fade as Rattler 6 passed north of the LZ. by using this build and fade technique, six determined that 67 was located somewhere east of LZ Pineapple. Rattler 6 turned east returned down the valley until they were just to the northeast of Pineapple. The signal from 67 was very clear and strong at this specific location.

Six turned south and proceeded up a small valley that runs north and south, east of the LZ. "Rattler 6, this is 67, I hear you approaching, over." This was good news and bad news. The good news was that Rattler 6 had quickly zeroed in on the approximate location of the crash site. The bad news was the weather. The cloud ceiling had dropped from 1500 feet to about 1050 feet and was solid overcast. Rattler 6 cautiously continued up the valley to a ground elevation of 1000 feet. By the time they reached this elevation, they were not flying, they were hovering. Hovering at tree top level just below the clouds. It was like being a piece of meat between two slices of bread, nowhere to go. The solid cloud layer was directly overhead and the treetops were almost brushing the tail boom.

James carefully hovered back and forth while getting directions from Skater 67. The directions were confusing. At one time while hovering up a small draw, 67 indicated that the sound was coming closer. James could not see good enough to continue at this point. The fog was getting thicker by the minute. He slowly started back out of the draw. During this maneuver, Skater continued to say that the sound was coming closer. After two more such confusing directions from Skater, James determined it was not his aircraft that was near the location. James informed King 6 of his analysis. King immediately informed James that a small opening in the clouds was now available southwest of the downed aircraft.

The opening was not large enough for the Jolly Green Giant to get through. Jolly Green Giant was the call sign for the Air Force HH-53E search and rescue helicopter. These helicopters were part of the 3rd Group and were under the command and control of King 6. This specific one was on station from the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) stationed at Da Nang which was only about 30 NM away. The HH-53E is large compared to the UH-1 flown by Major James. It is fully equipped with a hoist, stretchers, and trained Air Force medics.

Rattler 6 notified King he was going to climb out through the clouds to VFR (Visual Flight Rules) conditions on top (above the cloud layer). He requested King give him directions to the opening when he broke through the clouds. Rattler 6 started a slow ascent into the fog and clouds. He was fixed on the cockpit instruments because they were now the only method to keep the aircraft level and in forward motion. There was no visual reference. It was "milk bottle effect" all over again. When he broke out on top, King turned him over to the Jolly Green who directed them to the opening.

James descended down through the hole to tree top level and began hovering to the northeast. After approximately 15 minutes, they came to the top of a small ridge and could go no further. They could not make contact with Skater 67. The crew chief told James that he could not see the tail boom through the fog. The weather had gradually moved in behind them. Once again, James climbed IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) through the clouds to visual flight on top. They broke out at 3500 feet.

James proceeded east toward the coast. He contacted King and informed him that they were unable to contact 67 while on the south side of the mountain. James determined the crash location must be on the north side of the major ridge line. Just short of the coast and approximately six miles from the crash site, James again let down through an opening in the clouds. After getting under the clouds, he proceeded back to the vicinity of LZ Pineapple. A definite decrease was noted in Skater's radio signal after passing northwest of the LZ, further confirming James' suspicion the crash site was on the east side of Pineapple.

James proceeded east down the valley to a point just northeast of the LZ and turned south up the small north, south valley. Skater 67 confirmed that an aircraft was approaching his position. James continued up the valley as far as possible, turned 180 degrees and came out. Skater 67 confirmed an aircraft was departing the area. Again James flew into the valley. Skater 67 confirmed an aircraft approaching. James was now certain from Skater's confirmations and the increase strength from the radio signal they were at the correct location. He hovered just over the trees at the south end of the valley at about 1000 feet elevation.

By hovering back and forth and talking to Skater 67, James was trying to more accurately pinpoint the crash site. Skater 67 was not able to tell James the direction they were from the crash site. He could only tell them when they were closer to his position. After five or so minutes of this routine, James felt he had pinpointed 67's location. He began hovering up the hill with Skater giving him directions by saying if they were getting closer or further away. Again the fog was so thick the crew chief and gunner could not see the tail rotor which was only 25 feet from their position. James had to stop several times for as long as five minutes to allow the fog to clear before continuing the slow hover. The visibility was at best 40 feet and as low as 10 feet at several points. He was only able to maintain visual contact with the tree tops by looking out the right window. So far, so good.

Suddenly the aircraft began to lose engine power. The UH-1H does funny things when the engine power is fluctuating. The nose of the aircraft goes left, then right, then back left. A challenge when you can see the ground but horrifying when near treetop and almost in the clouds. James suspected the decrease in power was caused by the increase in altitude to about 1600 feet. The higher an aircraft climbs, the more power is required of the engine especially when hovering. James would find out later the aircraft had a compressor stall and the engine had to be replaced. For now though, James thought it was the weight and ordered the crew chief and gunner to dump at least half of their M-60 machine gun ammunition to lighten the load. A total of 4000 rounds was carried, 2000 per machine gun. This action decreased the weight enough for James to continue the mission. The aircraft performed flawlessly after this.

James requested Jolly Green to steer him toward Skater's location using his radio direction finder. The direction finder was standard equipment on the HH-53E but was not installed in the UH-1H aircraft. Jolly Green attempted to fulfill the request but the results were poor. Finally at 1750 feet, James determined he had passed the crash site based on his verbal conversations with Skater 67.

Time, daylight, and most importantly, fuel were running out. James only had enough fuel remaining for 10 minutes of station time and a quick flight to Chu Lai for refueling. James again elected to make an instrument take off and climb to VFR conditions on top. He very carefully explained his intentions to Jolly Green and asked for a recommended heading to get him safely out of the area. He was given a heading of 330. James was not able to turn the aircraft to this heading while hovering because of the inability to clear the tail rotor. He departed on a heading of 270 and turned as soon as it was safe to the 330 heading. James climbed at an airspeed of 30 knots to expedite the ascent. The preferred climb airspeed in instrument conditions is at least 60 knots. The UH-1H is much more difficult to handle at this lower speed.

Shortly after takeoff, Skater 67 informed James that it sounded like an aircraft had just passed over his position. James broke out of the clouds at 3000 feet and turned directly to Chu Lai. On the way to the Snake Pit, Rattler Operations informed James that ground troops from the Infantry Battalion were on the way to the crash site by foot. James was directed not to make another attempt to reach the crash site because of the poor visibility and approaching darkness. He did not particularly like the decision because he felt with a little more daylight, he could locate the crash site. Rational thought prevailed. The orders were logical. He did not want to risk another crew in the dark and bad weather. At this time the crash site could not be pinpointed.

The intense activity did not stop during the night of March 17th. The division operations center buzzed throughout the night executing the plan they had developed while planning for March 18th. The 71st AHC also planned for the next day. In coordination with Battalion, missions were assigned to each crew and the aircraft were assigned. Rattler maintenance assigned the snake doctor UH-1H to Rattler 6 for the next days' mission. The Aviation Battalion Commander would fly with Major James. Everyone in the company wanted the mission to go without a hitch. Check and double check was the theme for the night.

Through the 196th Brigade, the 1st of the 6th Infantry Battalion had been given the mission that day to move to and secure the crash site. Lieutenant Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf (who most people know as General Schwarzkopf of Desert Storm fame) commanded the 1/6th Infantry. A Company from the 1/6th had been breaking bush since early evening. They would move all night one inch, one foot at a time through the thick jungle and bad weather with no food or rest.

On the morning of the 18th, division presented the final briefing in Chu Lai. Major James attended with the 14th Battalion Commander. Division directed Major James and the Battalion Commander coordinate the days rescue operations and act as command and control for the air landing of troops if needed in the vicinity of the downed aircraft. Major James flew directly from the Snake pit to pick up LTC Schwarzkopf and his battalion surgeon, Captain (Doctor) Luis A. Oliver. It was important to have the commander of the 1/6th Battalion on board since they owned the troops moving toward the crash site plus those that were to be airlifted. The weather was no better than it was the day before, about 1000 feet-overcast. This low ceiling made it impossible to air land troops near Skater 67 so it was essential for James to continue the rescue efforts as a single helicopter.

As Major James turned up the small north-south valley east of LZ Pineapple, Skater 67 came on the radio for the first time in about four hours and confirmed an aircraft was approaching his location. James hovered just above the trees at an indicated altitude of 1000 feet. He carefully maneuvered the helicopter to a position about 50 meters to the west of where they had started up the hill the day before. Skater 67 stated the chopper was very close. James started up the hill very slowly. The fog and clouds were still hampering their ability to visually search for the crash site and more importantly was making it very difficult to hover.

James had hovered up the mountain for 15 minutes. Then..., "Rattler 6, this is Skater 67, I see you, turn left!!" "Rattler 6, roger." James cautiously turned the nose of the aircraft to the left using pressure on the left anti-torque pedal. He continued to hover at a crawl rate. The weather was deteriorating. James suddenly but slowly decelerated the aircraft with a light aft cyclic pull. The crashed helicopter was visible about 50 feet in front of the aircraft nose. It was lying upside down with no blades, no tail rotor, no tail boom, and very few identifiable features. Skater 67 was standing about 15 feet from the crashed aircraft on a large rock. He asked James not to come any closer. The fuselage of the crashed aircraft was very unstable and he was afraid rotor wash from James' aircraft would cause it to roll down hill. James complied.

Now what? It was impossible to land. near the crash site due to heavy brush and trees. There were severely wounded soldiers on the ground, medical attention was a priority. James hovered to a spot he thought he could hold. LTC Schwarzkopf and the crew chief secured a rope to the floor of the UH-1H and tied the other end around Captain Oliver (the surgeon). He was gently lowered out of the cargo door, down through the dense canopy to the jungle floor. The crash was only 20 to 30 feet away from his location. The crew chief and gunner had to direct his every step using hand and arm signals because of the heavy undergrowth. Even this short distance took the doctor 10 minutes to navigate. Oliver called for stretchers to be dropped shortly after reaching the wreckage.

The only possible landing point to pick up survivors was on the wreckage itself. James briefed King 4, who was the search and rescue for March 18th, it would be necessary to make an instrument takeoff after pickup and get a radar vector to Chu Lai hospital. King 4 acknowledged and coordinated the plan with all concerned. The crew chief advised James that the weather was breaking up in the valley below just as he started forward to land. James informed King 4 and requested a Jolly Green to make the pickup. King 4 dispatched a Jolly Green but they could not find the location. James immediately turned and flew to the valley floor where he rendezvoused with the Jolly Green and led him to the crash site. They anxiously waited. The weather was still not good enough for the large Jolly Green to maneuver to a pickup point. In a short time the weather lifted enough to get the Jolly Green over the crash site. The rescue operation was nearing completion. Air Force Staff Sergeant Jules Smith and Sergeant Stephen Sano were lowered to assist Captain Oliver. With their expertise on the ground, the rescue operation was completed.

One-by-one, the survivors were hoisted to the Jolly Green. General Ramsey woke in a daze for the first time since the crash with wind and rain in his face. He quickly sunk back into unconsciousness and did not wake again until he was in the hospital and the medics were cutting his clothes off. He was evacuated to Japan and later, on to the states with a mangled and broken arm and severe back injuries. He served as the Provost Marshall General of the Army after a recovery period at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. He was medically retired about a year after the crash.

James and his illustrious crew returned to the snake pit heroes. To Tommie P. James and his crew it was just another mission in the land of the Rattlers... "Rattler operations, this is Rattler 6, we're home, please close out my flight plan, over." "This is Rattler 3, wilco, welcome home, out!"

Seabolt note: In conversations with Johnny Hitt, Johnnie expressed the opinion that a mistake was probably made in identifying Skater 67 and Blue 24 resulting in this crash. Johnnie is due to receive a 120 page report

from Ft. Rucker concerning the crash, but had not received it as this was printed.

SUPPLEMENTAL MISSION NARRATIVE REPORT

DATE: 17 Mar 70

MISSION NUMBER: 1-3-019 17 Mar 70

FLIGHT DESIGNATION: Jolly Green 15 and 27

MISSION OBJECTIVE: Rescue/Recovery

LOCATION: 15°21'N, 108°34'E

SAVES: Six Combat Saves Credited

1. (U) SUMMARY OF SAR ACTIONS: At 1400Z on 17 Mar 70, the Bravo Alert Force was scrambled for a night launch. After rounding up all crewmembers we proceeded to the 37th APRS Operations Center where we received the following briefing from our Commander. "Jolly Green 42 and 07 are presently working a mission at Ch. 74. Jolly Green 42 is the On Scene Commander directing operations for a rescue attempt at 250/7/74 of Skater 67 a UH-1 Helicopter which crashed during an IFR approach to Ch. 74. On board were 9 persons of which 2 are reported KIA, and the others are in serious condition with at least one man with a known back injury. Your instructions are to relieve Jolly Green 42 and 07, and assist in the SAR any way you can." Jolly Green 15 and 27 launched at 1420Z and proceeded feet wet to CH.74. On the way to the SAR we were briefed by Jolly Green 42 on the current operation in the area. It seemed that a "Basketball 689" an H-130 Flare Ship was dropping flares thru the undercast in order to assist the ground team in locating the crash site. Jolly Green 42 and 07 returned to Ch. 77 due to fuel, and Jolly Green 15 and 27 took over as On Scene Commander at 1500Z. After each flare was dropped by the Basketball aircraft, he would ask the survivor how close it was to his position. The only survivor who was working the emergency radio was laying flat on his back due to injuries, and because of the low overcast it was extremely difficult for anyone to fix the crash position with the flare drops. At this time a Rattler 49 Huey was flying beneath the overcast and was reporting the bottoms of the overcast at 900 feet MSL. Rattler 49 could see the flares coming through the clouds, but could not go into the small valley where he thought the survivors were because the flares would burn out leaving him IFR until the next set of flares would light. He did estimate the distance between the ground and cloud ceiling was sufficient to fly through if he had continuous lighting from the flares. The radios on Jolly Green 15 were not as good as those on Jolly Green 27 who was now handling most of the communication between the ground team and the flare ship. Jolly Green 15 proceeded feet wet and obtained radar clearance to descend to VFR beneath the cloud deck.

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*Atch 3*

Upon going VFR, Jolly Green 15 proceeded into the valley where Rattler 49 was working. A nearly full moon did light up the clouds just enough so that the valley floor and ridgelines could be made out without the aid of flares. Both the Rattler and Jolly Green were not taking any ground fire in the large valley, and with sufficient moon light, and the seriousness of the survivors we decided to attempt some slow flight in the direction of the survivors radio with the aid of UHF DF. At one point in the attempt to locate the crash site we flew directly over the ground team who gave us a "Tally Ho" as we proceeded further up the hillside as our reception with Skater 67 became increasingly louder. Twice Skater said we were right over his position and we held our position as we attempted to get him to vector us in. We turned on our landing light at this time and asked Skater if he could see it. He replied that he would try to stand up and give us vectors into his position as we were "extremely close". We cautioned him not to try and move, but if any of the other survivors on the ground could see us to give directions for us to move in. We were advised to move up the ridgeline just a bit, and then turn right, we did so. Then came a call that we were going the wrong way and would we turn left, we did so. After 10 minutes of following directions and creeping dangerously close and into the clouds we had to abandon the search and take up an emergency heading which we had earlier computed and we made an IFR climb until we broke out of the clouds at 3500 feet MSL. We were able to determine Skaters position to within a fraction of a mile, but the crash site was in the clouds at 1100 to 1300 feet MSL which made rescue at night impossible. We also noted that the ground team still had a long distance to travel in order to reach the crash site. We believe we were helpful to the ground team in giving them a general location of Skater 67. Jolly Green 15 returned to Ch. 74 for additional fuel at 1745Z. At 1830Z Jolly Green 15 took off from Ch. 74 to relieve Jolly Green 27 as On Scene Commander while he went into Ch. 74 for fuel. For the remainder of the night one of the Jolly Greens continued to stay on station to further assist the ground team. Weather was getting worse and at 2130Z we were directed to RTB Ch. 77. We advised Queen that two Jolly Greens should be launched in the morning with several Stokes Litters aboard to continue the effort at first light. Fortunately the weather did lift in mid morning when Jolly Green 09 and 35 were able to complete the pick-up of the remaining six seriously injured members of Skater 67. See Mission Narrative 1-3-019, 17 Mar 70 by Jolly Green 09 and 35. Jolly Green 15 and 27 terminated at Ch. 77 at 2220Z 18 Mar 70.

2. (U) 11/33.8/HH-3E/37ARRS, 3/10.3/HC-130P/39ARRS, plus multiple Army aircraft.
3. Ground Team with 50 troops (Call sign unknown).
4. Two
5. See Mission Narrative Report 1-3-019 17 Mar 70

*Amazing!*

6. Jolly Green Crews:

Jolly Green 15

AC Capt. Kenneth T. Kelley  
CP Maj. James Z. Elkinton  
FE Sgt. Jimmie D. Rash  
RS MSgt. Harold W. Harvey

Jolly Green 27

AC Maj. David E. Vaughan  
CP Capt. Royce W. Terrell  
FE TSgt. Gerald L. Hartzel  
RS SSgt. Eugene L. Nardi

  
KENNETH T. KELLEY, Captain, USAF  
Aircraft Commander

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE**  
**37TH AEROSPACE RESCUE & RECOVERY SQUADRON (MAC)**  
**APO SAN FRANCISCO 96337**



REPLY TO  
ATTN OF:

37 (0)

19 March 1970

SUBJECT:

Mission Narrative Report (1-3-019) 17 Mar 70 (U)

Classified by Det 1 3044  
SUBJECT TO GENERAL DECLASSIFICATION  
SCHEDULE OF EXECUTIVE ORDER 11652  
AUTOMATICALLY DOWNGRADED AT TWO  
YEAR INTERVALS.  
DECLASSIFIED ON 31 Dec 78

TO:

37C

3 ARRGp (ARCC)

DOWNGRADED TO  
**CONFIDENTIAL** 049 Apr 73  
IAW EX. ORDER 11-52

1. (U) This report is submitted IAW ARRSM 55-2/3rd ARRGp Sup 1, dated 15 June 1968.

2. (S) On 19 March 1970, at 0715L Jolly Green 09 launched on the Skater 62 mission whose position was 244/6 $\frac{1}{2}$ /74. Jolly Green 35, high bird, was airborne at 0745L after an aircraft change. Both aircraft proceeded feet wet to the Channel 74 area, Jolly Green 09 arriving at approximately 0740L and Jolly Green 35 arriving at 0810L. Both aircraft held feet wet off Channel 74. Shortly after arriving in the 74 area King 4 suggested Jolly Green 09 go VFR on top in an attempt to fly over the area of the survivors. Vice Squad provided radar separation until VFR on top was reached at 6000 feet. Since at that altitude the survivors would not be able to hear Jolly Green 09 pass overhead, a descent was made thru a hole to an altitude varying between 2500 and 3500 feet. Cloud buildups precluded getting very close to the area of the survivors. By this time Rattler 06 was over the survivors in marginal weather conditions and deploying a doctor to the crash site. Jolly Green 09 was then requested to hold west of Channel 74 but, east of the mountains, VFR. Jolly Green 09 proceeded to the requested area, in the mean time Rattler 06 was running low on fuel. While Jolly Green 09 held, Skater 64 came on scene to assist Jolly Green 09 locate the crash site. Jolly Green 09 and Skater 64 joined up, with Jolly Green 09 in trail approximately one mile behind Skater 64. Jolly Green 09 was erroneously directed into the wrong valley which necessitated flying thru a small saddle in marginal weather, turning around and then exiting the valley. At approximately this same time Rattler 06 came out of the area of the crash site to lead Jolly Green 09 in. At this time Jolly Green 09 jettisoned the tip tanks retaining 2000 pounds of internal fuel. The survivors redirected Rattler 06 to their position, with Jolly Green 09 following at approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile. When over the survivors, Rattler 06 was obscured by fog but, visible. Jolly Green 09 requested Rattler 06 to pull off and was then vectored to the crash site by the survivors, establishing a hover approximately 100 feet downslope from the crashed aircraft at approximately 0910L. The two PJs deployed immediately on the forest penetrator to assist the doctor and to prepare the survivors for recovery. The PJs were deployed at a distance from the crashed site because it was feared the rotor downwash would dislodge the crashed aircraft, possibly further injuring the survivors. The survivors were located at an elevation of 1570 feet MSL on the west face of an irregular ridge.

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~~GROUP 4~~  
~~Downgraded at 3 year~~  
~~intervals; declassified~~  
~~after 12 years~~

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