

18-HOUR ORDEAL ENDS

MASSIVE RESCUE EFFORT SAVES PILOT

TAN SON NHUT AB, RVN (7AF)—An 18-hour ordeal came to an end on July 29 as an HH-3E Jolly Green Giant helicopter slipped down to the treetops to rescue Air Force Maj. Petter B. Lee.

The A-1 Skyraider pilot, downed during early morning darkness while flying an interdiction mission against enemy supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, was lifted uninjured to safety by a 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron crew from Da Nang Airfield in the Republic of Vietnam.

The rescue came after the downed pilot had spent the day hiding atop a hill with the enemy as close as two to three hundred yards from his position.

Rescue efforts, managed from the Seventh Air Force Joint Coordination Center here, were massive.

Fighter and rescue aircraft from bases in Thailand and Vietnam flew more than 120 sorties in the face of ceaseless and incredibly heavy antiaircraft fire in their efforts to keep the enemy away from Major Lee.

FIGHTERS POUND ENEMY

F-4 Phantoms, F-105 Thunderchiefs and A-1 Skyraiders pounded enemy locations as forward air controllers and rescue craft patiently performed their job—waiting for just the right moment to get in and pick up the downed airman.

"It was the most beautiful sight in the world," Major Lee said of the Jolly Green that finally came in and lowered its jungle penetrator.

SKYRAIDER HIT

The events began quickly.

While pulling up after a pass over a target, Major Lee's Skyraider was hit in the wing and tail. The aircraft went into a dive and he bailed out.

"I was in a pretty bad place to be bailing out," he explained. "I hit along the side of a hill. It was a very easy landing."

Knowing that he was in a dangerous position because of enemy troops, Major Lee immediately began climbing up-hill to get as high and as far away as possible from the spot where he had landed.

"For the next two hours I was intermittently climbing for 15 minutes and then calling on my survival radio and letting my wing man know I was all right," he said.

"Ultimately," he added, "I got up to a point where I figured I could hide. I was covered by bushes and trees and undergrowth that would make it very difficult for the enemy to find me. I dug myself a little pit in the ground and hid.

"From then on," he continued, "all during the night the forward air controllers were overhead and talking to me. I would let them know what I heard and saw on the ground."

The forward air controllers, in turn, let the downed airman know what the rescue plans were and what he could expect to happen.

NO EARLY PICKUP

Rescue was still far away, however, as the dawn brought overcast skies, frustrating hopes for an early pick-up.

Around 11 a.m. the sky began to clear, and Capt. Jim Richmond, a forward air controller with the 23d Tactical Air Support Squadron at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, was ready to go to work.

He put in, he explained, "ten flights of 'fast movers,' both Navy and Air Force."

Major Lee was watching it all from his hiding place.

"The fast movers, the supersonic fighter airplanes, came in with their armament and placed their bombs extremely accurately on the antiaircraft gun emplacements around the position where I was. I was 'fairly close to the gun positions,'" he said.

Another forward air controller on the scene later was Capt. Fred Parrott, an OV-10 Bronco pilot.

"Our primary job to assist the search and rescue," he said, "is to silence or destroy these weapons. More strike aircraft were just starting to get there. I took over and marked the positions."

DOWNED PILOT HELPED

The jets then used their large bombs to eventually destroy the known gun positions. Enemy firepower included everything from small arms fire to heavy calibre (37mm and 57mm) antiaircraft weapons.

Constant coordination between the forward air controllers and Major Lee on the ground aided in identifying enemy gun positions so they could be pounded by the air strike.

Late in the afternoon the on-scene commander, Maj. John C. Waresch, assigned to the 602d Special Operations Squadron at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, ordered smoke bombs dropped to act as a screen for the downed pilot.

FROM THE COMBAT ZONE

"The smoke bombs started going off," he said, "and they drew a line of solid smoke about three quarters of a mile long between the heavy guns and the survivor."

Strike aircraft continued to smash enemy positions as the smoke screen was being set up.

Finally, the Jolly Green, piloted by Maj. George C. Hitt, began to move toward the pilot.

Major Hitt followed the Skyraiders, who were laying down the smoke. "It was almost like driving down the L.A. freeway with the white centerline," he explained.

"We dropped over the next ridge and there was the red smoke from Major Lee. We dropped right down on him."

PILOT 'SURE' OF RESCUE

The flight engineer, SSgt. Joseph J. Vai, said, "We held in a hover and lowered the penetrator. We were in and out with no problem. We did receive some small arms fire on the way out, but nothing serious."

Then it was all over. And Major Lee seemed scarcely disturbed.

He commented in retrospect, "I believe that the mission of the pilot in Southeast Asia is enhanced by the fact that he knows if he is hit like I was, his chances of rescue are very, very good.

"I felt sure I would be rescued."

And thanks to the teamwork and courage of the men of the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group, he was right.