

Downed pilots spend 'longest 22 hours'

DA NANG AFLD — After what was possibly the longest 22 hours of their lives, two jet fighter pilots were pulled out of heavily infested enemy territory recently by rescue crews of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron.

Capt. David R. Hedditch and 1st Lt. Thomas M. McLaughlin, F-4 Phantom crew members at Phu Cat AB, bailed out of their aircraft after it was hit by enemy fire near the Laotian city of Tchepone. That event started a chain reaction which was to become one of the most heavily contested search and rescue efforts in SEA during recent months.

With the enemy sometimes within 20 meters of his position, Captain Hedditch managed to lay low and evade his would-be captors while A-1 Sky-raidors and jet fighters pounded the area to silence the enemy ground fire so that rescue choppers could get in.

Lieutenant McLaughlin, who was approximately half a mile away from his fellow pilot, said that the enemy was so close to his position that at one



Captain Hedditch

time while hiding in a bush he was "practically looking at two of them face-to-face." I reached for my weapon and then froze in my position. Amazingly they didn't spot me and about five minutes later they started moving on down the hill.

Hindered by heavy enemy ground fire and poor weather conditions, the rescue efforts were unsuccessful the

first day. But with the first light of the new day the rescue aircraft were once again airborne and headed for the area.

"Around noon the area had been saturated enough for us to come in," recalled Capt. John R. Weimer Jr., HH-53 co-pilot. "We were still receiving ground fire, but once we found the survivors, the ground fire was not so intense that we could not stay there."

Said Capt. Carlton I. Bakke, rescue helicopter commander, "We came in at treetop level and picked up this aircraft commander (Captain Hedditch) first. We saw his smoke marker and spotted him right away and had him pulled up within two or three minutes.

"We then had to go over a little ridge to get the back seater. We aimed for his smoke and again we were about two or three minutes in a hover. Just as he was coming in the door we started receiving more ground fire and more hits. We got out low and fast and we received more ground fire."

Lieutenant McLaughlin recalled that when he saw the rescue chopper coming in, "I left everything I had sitting there and scrambled through the



U.S. Air Force Photos by
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Lieutenant McLaughlin

trees, falling down and tripping in the elephant grass, trying to get to that penetrator which hit the ground about the time I got to it.

"Once I got on the penetrator, it seemed like forever before I got in the aircraft, with all the firing going on around me. But I guess they were shooting at the chopper and not me."