

13Mar71 A-7 SAR

Saturday, 13 March 1971: after two and a half months without any Navy aircraft combat losses (but six operational losses, five if them during landing and takeoff) an A-7E Corsair II from VA-113 based on the USS Ranger (CVA-61) was hit by AAA fire over a valley about 25 miles northwest of the infamous A Shau Valley.

The heavy fire came from area Oscar Eight, the code name for a transportation nexus containing a major road junction (highway 92 and 922) the Hoi An River, the control center for the Ho Chi Minh trail, headquarters for the 559th Transportation group, and the largest NVA storage facility outside of North Vietnam. It was festooned with expertly camouflaged defensive guns, from small arms up through heavy caliber AA guns, some mounted on platforms in trees. Oscar Eight was a bad place; more American planes were downed in the Oscar Eight area than any comparably sized area in Laos.

His Corsair II's starboard wing sheared off by a 23mm hit, **Lt Barton Creed** just barely had time to eject from the violently gyrating plane, breaking a leg and a arm, but escaping alive. On the ground, he was able to communicate with his wingman circling him, who sounded the alarm for rescue forces. The on scene FAC, OV-10A Nail 34 immediately established Creed's correct position, and then marked a false location with smoke in an attempt to draw the enemy away from the immobile man's location.

Over the next several hours, Creed kept radio contact with the planes above him, while preparations were made for a rescue attempt.

Finally, after 11 suppression sorties of ordnance, Nail 34 reported no return fire. Creed told Nail he thought he might pass out, and motivated by this second factor Sandy lead [OSC] coordinated a pickup attempt. Lt Col Royal A. Brown Jr., commanding a HH-53C, Jolly 64 of the 40th ARRSq moved in for the pickup. He and his crew received light small arms fire as they ran in. Someone thought they saw movement in the grass about 100 feet from Creed's position, but Brown continued on into a hover over their

survivor. The flight engineer, TSgt. Charles C. Jack, began lowering a rescue PJ by hoist and reported seeing Creed lying 10 feet from his parachute and waving a hand. The PJ was within 30 feet of the ground, suspended helpless between Heaven-&-Earth when the NVA sprang their ambush, opening small arms fire in a crossfire from northwest and northeast. The helicopter began to take hits immediately, wounding another PJ, Airman 1st Class Michael A. Curtis.

Brown broke off the hover, streaming the suspended PJ below them as they withdrew from the area.

Brown was informed that Curtis had a flesh wound in the thigh, but was game to continue. Checking the hits on the aircraft and determining they were minor, Brown reported that the enemy was within 100 to 150 yards of Creed and if he was not rescued immediately, he would be lost. He ventured that the Sandys could strafe that close to Creed and wanted to make another try ...right away.

As the Sandys rolled in strafing, Jolly 64 moved in, again taking small arms fire on the run in. Once more in the hover, one of Brown's three mini guns jammed, and a burst of AK-47 fire shattered the cockpit windscreen, hitting the co-pilot Maj. Frank J. Pehr. A round broke his femur and cut an artery and another his left hand. Pehr passed out, and Brown with copilot down, one gun jammed and taking more hits broke the hover and fled the vortex of fire, again without Creed.

Curtis, Jack, and another PJ, Airman 1st Class Steven Rhoady, pulled Petr from his seat, stopped the bleeding and started an IV. Brown headed the HH-53 for Quang Tri and better medical aid, escorted by Jolly 73.

HC-130E King 26 relieved King 24 and after three hours of additional suppression, four Sandys [two dispensing CBU smoke] escorted Jolly 73 in for the pickup. It was the 37th ARRSq turn in-the-barrel, with rescue crew commander Maj Donald L. Jenson having the honor of the second rescue attempt.

Again Jolly took light small arms fire on the run in, ceasing as the helicopter pulled into a hover over the chute, with no sign of Creed. Then

heavy fire opened up from the south and east, no more than 200 feet away. Immediately a hit and severed all communications ~~~~ and no one could talk to or hear anyone else.

An engine fuel control also took a hit causing the engine to lose power and forcing the copilot Maj. William J. Osley to employ the manual throttle control to keep it on line. Jensen, weighing these factors, as well as feeling the engine surges and hearing the guns faltering behind him , broke his hover and fled.

Once clear, Jensen discovered that two of his PJs were wounded: TSgts Eugene L. Nardi and Richard M. Crowley. He flew his ailing helicopter and crew to Quang Tri safely, while the flight engineer, SSgt. David Cutillo, and PJ Airman 1st Class Gust Dinos, tended Nardi and Crowley. With the two WIA PJs delivered to the dispensary, Jensen and his three fellow crewmembers counted 20 hits in the Jolly's main transmission, electronics compartment, rotor blades, auxiliary fuel tank, and the main cabin.

Two more Jollys arrived, numbers 60 and 62, but before they could be employed, Jolly 62 experienced an engine fire and had to shut down the number one engine and retire, escorted by Jolly 60.

After a total of 15 fast-mover strikes and the arrival of two more smoke A-1 Sandys, Sandy 09 [the new OSC lead] organized the third rescue attempt.

King 26 tried to get additional Sandys, but there were no more. He tried to get backup Jollys, but there was no more, and when he tried to get more fast-movers, none was available from Hillsboro, the EC-130E ABCCC airborne command post, and they were running out of daylight.

Smoke and CS gas were dispensed and Jolly 73, again from the 37th ARRSq [its crew in gas masks] began its approach in the twilights last glimmer, the sun having just set.

With full knowledge of the results of the two previous efforts, the pilot, Lt. Col. Harry S. Copperthite Jr., took his HH-53 northeast up the left side of a column of smoke, with Sandy calling for a hard right turn at the end of the smoke wall to find the rescue area ahead.

Numerous small fires and the smoke made for confusion, but Copperthite made the turn correctly. Jolly 73 flew right into another vortex of converging small arms fire and the bird was riddled by gunfire from right below them. MSgt. James D. Scott, the senior PJ was immediately hit, as was Copperthite himself. He aborted the run and turned into the smoke wall for concealment. An engine rolled-back despite the best -1 emergency procedure efforts of the copilot, Capt. Donald G. Beattie, and flight engineer, TSgt. Alfred R. Priante.

Scott administered first aid to Copperthite and himself, assisted by the junior PJ Airman 1st Class Ervin A. Petty. Jolly 73, the third rescue helicopter to be stricken, managed to return to Quang Tri on its remaining engine and the crew was treated for injuries. They had not seen either Creed or his chute at the rescue scene.

The OSC Sandy lead realized he had not heard from Creed since before the first rescue attempt. Barton Creed's last radio call was *"Get me out now, get me out now! They are here"*.

After dark, a fourth attempt was made with an Air Force Jolly lowering a PJ to the jungle floor for a ground search. This audacious effort found no trace of Creed or of the enemy and the PJ was withdrawn without incident.

The original SAR Nail FAC went back looking for Creed the next morning and sighted his parachute about 500 meters from the previous days location. The parachute was spread out carefully, an overt advertisement that no evading airman would do. It was clearly a trap, and the bait was not taken. Sometimes the best and most courageous efforts are for naught.

Barton Creed was one of only two naval aviators lost in action in 1971, making his loss noteworthy for that. He was also notable on another grim list: he is one of four men known to have been held in captivity in Laos ...only a few of these POWs returned at the end of the war.

Creed's name was [reportedly] recorded in a National Security Agency (NSA) intercept opening the possibility he might still be alive. In addition to Creed, Air Force Capts. David Hrdlicka and Charles Shelton and civilian Eugene Debruin were known captives who were not returned at the end of hostilities. All are presumed dead now, two hundred ninety four

others are missing in Laos, and 99 could have survived their crash but were not proven to have been captured and are still unaccounted for.

credit: **LEAVE NO MAN BEHIND**, by LCDR Tom Phillips, USN [via John David Birch, USN SAR swimmer]
