

6 Injured In Laos SAR Try

Six crewmen from the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron were injured and three HH-53 BUFF helicopters damaged Saturday in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue a fighter pilot shot down in Laos.

Lt. Col. Royal Brown, squadron commander, piloted the first aircraft to go in for an attempted pickup. "We took small arms fire for the entire mile of our run-in and once we began to hover over the survivor the whole tree line opened up on us," said the colonel.

A Broken Leg

The downed pilot suffered a broken leg and broken arm during his ejection so it was necessary for a pararescueman (PJ) to descend and help him board the chopper. In doing so the PJ was hit by small arms fire and Colonel Brown pulled his chopper out of the area and took stock of the situation.

The colonel continued, "I checked out the aircraft and the PJ and decided we could risk another try before heading back to base."

On the second pass the colonel's copilot was hit in the leg and Colonel Brown decided to head back to Quang Tri and the nearest medical facility.

F-4 Phantoms from the 366th TFW "Gunfighters" then came in and worked over

the surrounding area. Evidently the enemy troops were waiting for another chopper for they held their fire until the fighters were out of the area and Maj. Donald L. Jensen took his HH-53 in.

This time the enemy guns injured both PJs on the BUFF and Major Jensen was forced to leave the area without picking up the pilot.

For a third time the fighters went in and plastered the area, bombing and strafing enemy positions. Then it was Lt. Col. Harry S. Copperthite's turn to pilot the rescue chopper. He skimmed in over the downed pilot and was promptly wounded in the hand by enemy fire.

Bullets raked the chopper fore and aft, injuring a PJ and damaging one engine. With this engine shut down, the colonel turned around and headed back for Quang Tri.

Too Dark To Continue

By this time it was getting too dark to continue operations, so the search and rescue (SAR) operation was halted until morning. The three choppers involved in the rescue attempt had suffered 20 to 30 hits apiece and six men were temporarily out of commission.

The downed pilot broke radio contact during the night and after a specified period of time, the SAR was officially terminated. "It's very seldom we don't get a pilot out," related the sober-faced Colonel Brown. "In two tours over here, this is only the third one I can remember, but we'd do it again if we had to. The BUFFs are a downed crewmember's insurance policy and there's not a one of us here who wouldn't do it all over again."

THE 37th RECEIVES 8 PURPLE HEARTS
for
ONE BIG MISSION OVER LAOS