

24 March 1971



TODAY IN SEA HISTORY

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While checking a well-known ford for enemy traffic in southern Laos [*Loss Coordinates: 155100 North / 1064100 East*] an OV-10 FAC of the 20th TASS call sign Covey, Lt Jack Butcher, who was flying the Bronco solo that day was suddenly taken under fire. The first that Butcher knew he was under fire was when a 37mm round exploded against the nose of his plane. Shrapnel wounded him, and reacting instinctively, he ejected immediately from his Bronco. Blacking out in his parachute, he awoke on the ground, crawled into a bush, and passed out again. He was awakened by NVA soldiers, who had rendered first aid and took him to their camp. On the fifth day of his captivity, Butcher escaped while his guards were napping after lunch and remained free for several hours during the manhunt.

Recaptured, Butcher was interrogated until 4 May 1971, when he began a trek to North Vietnam back up the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Five days later, he escaped again when his transport guards gave him too much privacy during a call of nature. Within 12 hours, the US National Security Agency had intercepted three radio messages about Butcher's escape, and the Joint Personnel Recovery Center immediately agitated for resources to attempt to find Butcher and rescue him. Their efforts were met with limited success until Gen. Creighton Abrams, commander Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was briefed. His verdict: that guy's got balls, we have to save him.

Advised of the poor response when the aircraft support was requested, Abrams excused himself, made a short visit, and returned to tell JPRC they had the entire 7th Air Force at their disposal. For the first time, The NSA was actively supporting an ongoing SAR in progress. A million leaflets were dropped in the area where Butcher was believed to be evading, encouraging someone, anyone to come to his aid. The Coveys of the 20th TASS scoured the area, Recce missions photographed the area repeatedly, and the photo interpreters searched for clues of signals. Finding a code letter "N", which was the right identification letter for the month of March, when Butcher was shot down, three Madden kits were dropped there, but they remained untouched. A "Bright Light" team was inserted into the area, and reported the "N" was several months old, and not from Butcher. The team attracted attention while scouting around and had to be extracted under fire.

The NVA were searching just as hard as the JPRC, and with the same results: **...nothing**. The Americans employed airborne loud speakers, both to send messages to Butcher, and to send messages to the local populace. This concerned the NVA enough to counter it with proselytizing teams to determine if local people had been helping Butcher, and you spread the word what would happen if they were found to be doing so. The NVA took to referring to him as the "Screeching Owl" because he was so stealthy.

After 10 days, Screeching Owl stumbled into a camouflaged building complex near a village on the outskirts of Tchepone, and was captured, starving and physically drained from the effects of malaria. A second Bright Light team, inserted to pursue another code message laid out in a field was also extracted under heavy fire, and shortly the NSA confirmed Butcher's capture. The exhilaration of being close to rescuing an escaped prisoner was transformed into absolute misery for the JPRC personnel.

Jack Butcher's luck ran out near Tchepone, but he was actually lucky in another respect to have been captured by the NVA, for of 215 airmen downed and believed to be alive on the ground in Laos, in territory controlled by the Pathet Lao, only nine returned from captivity. He was one of them, eventually returning to friendly hands in the prisoner release on 28 March 1973, after the Paris peace accords.

►► Credit: *Leave No Man Behind: The Saga of Combat Search and Rescue*

By George Galdorisi, Thomas Phillips

► <http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=24163>