

DOWN IN THE NORTH

by Lt. Col. ROBERT D. PRIEST

Falcon Eight-Four, cleared for takeoff.

Roger, Eight-Four rolling.

My bomb-laden Phantom thundered into the air, followed closely by my wingman, Falcon Eight-Five, and then a trim RF-4 reconnaissance aircraft. I turned toward the Mekong River, leading my flight to a refueling rendezvous with a tanker. The two fighters were assigned the job of protecting the reconnaissance aircraft during a 20 minute picture-taking incursion into North Vietnam. The reconnaissance aircraft would photograph the results of a strike, which was going on at the moment. As we refueled, the fourth member of our flight, a "photo recce bird" from another base, joined my formation.

Major Bob "Cub" Cubberly, a seasoned navi-

gator with more than 100 combat missions, was flying as my back seater. Before takeoff, Cub and I had worked together studying enemy defenses, and planning every detail of our flight. With the strikes ahead of us stirring up antiaircraft guns, surface to air missiles (SAMS) and perhaps MIGS, we were expecting some excitement.

Shortly after leaving the tanker, I turned the lead of the flight over to the reconnaissance pilot, and we spread into a defensive formation. Cockpit indicators showed that we were being watched by unfriendly radars as we crossed the North Vietnamese border. As far ahead as I could see an unexpected layer of cloud hid the ground. The recon birds would get no pictures here.

The reece pilot announced he was going to cut

this leg short, and turned toward the South, to look for better weather along another segment of his route. As we steadied out on a southerly heading, my warning panel lit up, showing that SAMS were preparing to launch.

Eight-Four has SAM warning at six o'clock!

Eight-Five, same, same!

Falcon Eight-Four, break right! All four aircraft shuddered around the turn. We rolled out on a westerly heading, putting the SAM locations off our right wing. A SAM must be seen to be avoided and a missile streaking up from six o'clock is difficult to see.

Just as we leveled our wings, a missile burst up through the clouds. I threw the stick forward, and pressed the mike button.

Two Air Force officers stood at Sharon's door, the most dreaded sight a flyer's wife can behold.

"He can't be dead," she said.

SAM, SAM, three o'clock! Eight-Four flight, take it down, take it down! The huge white rocket, trailing a long orange plume, leveled off a little, but did not follow us down. We were safe. Sounding like a passing train, it crossed high above and exploded off to our left.

A second missile shot well behind us—no threat! We were much lower now. I yelled at the flight, *Heads up for more!* I had hardly finished the last word, when the third SAM flashed out of the cloud, very close, and leveled with us. Again I threw the stick full forward, and again the angry rocket did not seem to follow us down. We've defeated it, I thought, and gave the word, *Let's get out of here!*

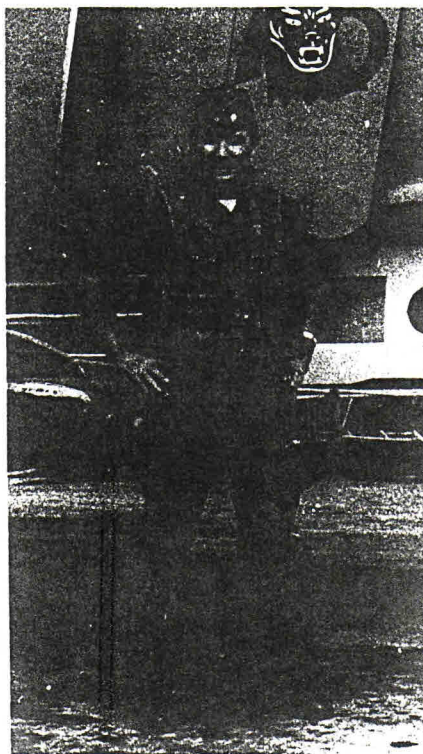
The SAM exploded with a dull "WHUMP" as it crossed above and behind us. Our airplane shook violently for an instant and then flew on with a slight, steady vibration.

Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! Falcon Eight-Four has taken a hit! I released the mike button and shouted into my oxygen mask again, *We're still flying, Cub! We're still flying!* There was no response, only a hissing squeal in my earphones. My radio and the intercom were gone. Somehow, Cub understood that I did not want him to eject while we still had control of the airplane. Although several warning lights were on in the cockpit, both engines continued to run. A primary hydraulic system had been damaged, but the *Phantom* continued to respond to my control. There was no indication of fire. I jettisoned our bombs and external fuel tank, and continued to check over the instruments and warning lights in the cockpit. This was a sick bird, but I was not sure just how sick.

Shrapnel from the exploding missile had punched four small

holes in Cub's canopy. One of the tiny steel fragments lodged in his left thumb. He was busy in the back seat, trying to bring our intercom back to life, when the nose of the aircraft started to pitch up sharply, but smoothly. I could not stop it. The airplane was out of control. Unknown to us, the entire aft section was on fire—and shedding parts. Seconds before, we both had hoped we could nurse the damaged plane back to base—now there was only one thing to do—eject.

I pulled the "D" ring between my knees with both hands. The cold, sharp blast of a 500 knot slipstream and the roar of the rockets signaled Cub's departure from the rear cockpit. A split second later I felt myself blasting upward. In an instant I was hanging beneath my parachute. Across my right shoulder, I could see our F-4, inverted, nose down, and engulfed in orange flame and black smoke. Below me, Cub swung in his chute, and below him stretched a white expanse of cloud, concealing the countryside. Our future depended on what lay beneath those clouds. If we were near the flat and populated coastline, the possibility of capture would be high. If we were over the mountains, away from



roads and villages, there might be a chance.

Forty-five seconds had elapsed from missile detonation to ejection. It was five minutes to three on a Monday afternoon, March 22, 1971. And here we were, drifting with the winds and the pull of gravity, somewhere over North Vietnam.

I pulled out my survival radio. *Falcon flight, this is Eight-Four Alpha, in my chute and O.K.* Almost immediately I heard Cub working his radio.

Eight-Four Bravo—I'm O.K.—good chute.

Falcon Eight-Five "rogered" and started circling in our vicinity. The rescue pilot had already reported our dilemma, and the rescue operation was now in motion. I stuffed the radio back into my vest and concentrated on my immediate problem, the parachute descent and landing.

Cub sank closer to the top of the clouds and as he disappeared into the mist, I wondered if I would ever see him again. Inside the cloud it was turbulent and disorienting. After what seemed like a long time, the ground began to appear below. The terrain looked rugged and covered with trees — no villages and no roads. I could see Cub's chute tangled across a treetop, well up the side of a slope, and had to suppress an almost irresistible desire to shout to him. With cracking branches and tearing leaves, I hit the treetops and came to a gentle bobbing halt. I hung there without moving — and listened intently.

All was quiet for a moment; then the muffled crack of four shots! They came from Cub's direction. I spoke softly into the mike. *This is Falcon Eight-Four Alpha, Bravo, do you read?*

Since the four shots were sharp and clear to Cub, he thought that

After punching-out of his dying *Phantom*, Lt. Col. Robert D. Priest and his back-seater Maj. Bob Cubberly, spent a night in the jungles of North Vietnam

the enemy had found me—and then he heard my call.

Bravo reads, I'm in a tree with "Gomers" below! (Gomers, a nickname for enemy troops).

My wing man was still circling above, and heard us both. He said that he had to leave because of low fuel, and that other aircraft were coming into the area.

Cub was not hung securely in his tree as I was in mine. His chute was snagged on one side only, suspending him by his left riser. He could feel himself slowly inching lower and lower as his chute was slipping through the branches, well over 150 feet above the ground—too high to use his tree escape equipment.

I listened for a few more minutes, could hear nothing, and decided to get out of my tree before the bad guys started moving in my direction.

My lowering device gave me two heart-stopping hang-ups of the nylon tape during my spider-like descent. I sat on the ground for a moment, listening, and then began to make my way quietly up the steep slope. I wanted to check the other side of the ridge, and if it was quiet, find a hiding place there.

The opposite side was more of the same—steep terrain and dense jungle. I could hear no unusual sounds. A "Sandy" (A1E Skyraider) arrived overhead, a prop driven, potently armed, advance member of the rescue force. We exchanged several radio calls as the "Sandy" pilot worked to fix my position. By this time the clouds had lowered to the ridge tops, it was raining, and getting dark. The "Sandy" was flying in clouds, just barely above the hills in the area.

Sandy Zero-Nine, there's no way you can get under this stuff, the clouds are down to the ridge line.

Roger, Babe, the weather looks grim up here too. I've got your location fixed.

A fast mover arrived with the bad news I had been expecting. *Falcon Eight-Four, this is Stormy Zero-One.*

Rog, Zero-One.

The word is they can't get you out tonight, but will try in the morning. Come up with 15 seconds of beeper every two hours, and follow with voice. We'll be listening. Rescue will be back at first light.

Those were depressing words, even though I knew it was impossible to get us out that night. Even more depressing was the knowledge that chances of rescue are considerably less after a night on the ground. Cub acknowledged Stormy's words with a quiet transmission—the first I had heard from him in two hours.

Only a few more minutes of dusky light remained, and I had to find a place to hide. I eased down the opposite side of the ridge from where I had landed, until I could no longer see the top. I found a small fallen tree and cut palm-like branches to lay across it, making a crude, but satisfactory shelter from the rain. I studied my radio carefully, so I could work it by feel, got out a large plastic map to cover

myself, and settled down on the hillside for the night.

Just before dark, Cub's chute pulled loose, dropping him 40 feet through the tree, hanging up again. Enemy troops had already been within 50 yards of him, and he was sure they had heard him fall. Again he was precariously suspended by one riser. Soon after dark, however, he fell the more than 100 feet to the ground, glanced off the steep slope, and rolled up against a tree. Miraculously, he was unhurt, but had made a tremendous amount of noise. For the next seven hours, Cub lay silently where he had fallen, wet, cold, and fearing that the slightest additional sound would attract the enemy who had surely heard his crashing fall.

Our chances depended on what the weather conditions would be next morning. If weather was good, rescue might be possible. If not, we would have to evade as best we could. My hopes were pretty dim, not only because enemy troops were all around, but because poor weather was the rule in the hills of North Vietnam at this time of year.

It was pitch dark now. The only break in the blackness came from the weirdly fluorescent leaves on the ground, and from the face of my watch. The time was 7 p.m.

During the night I had a lot of time to think. My first concern was what to do if the weather was bad in the morning. I decided I would move, if it seemed safe, as far west as I could, deeper into the hills, and away from my parachute. I thought about my family in California. I wondered if they had been told that I was down, and I worried about how my wife, Sharon, and the children would take the news. I thought about several friends who were either missing or captured, and won-

**I'm in
a tree
with
gomers
below.**

dered if I would be joining them soon. I knew Sharon would be thinking the same thing. I wondered what kind of prisoner I would be. All that I had been taught about interrogation and conduct as a POW seemed vague to me now. I wondered if I would let myself be taken prisoner—a question I had often pondered, but never answered.

Eight p.m. Time to call.

* * *

In Victorville, Calif., it was 6 a.m. Sharon arose and began her daily routine. The children were readied for school; then there was the usual picking up around the house and vacuuming to do. There were letters to write, some shopping to take care of, and perhaps time to read before the children returned from school.

Just after lunch, two Air Force officers stood at Sharon's front door. The most dreaded vision a flyer's wife ever has, was unfolding.

"He cannot be dead," she said.

"It's not as bad as you think, Mrs. Priest." The colonel handed her a telegram. Her trembling hand could not hold it steady.

"You'll have to read it to me."

It is with deep personal concern that I officially inform you that your husband, Maj. Robert D. Priest, is missing in action in North Vietnam . . . Voice contact has been established with him. Search and rescue efforts are in progress . . .

"Is there someone we could call?"

A close friend, an Air Force widow, arrived within minutes. Then followed the hours of waiting, wondering, and crying. Could he be rescued? What were they doing now? Would he be captured? Or would they simply shoot him? And of course, the children would have to be told. Afternoon passed into evening. More people arrived: four women whose husbands were in

Southeast Asia, some neighbors, friends from a nearby air base, and three fellow pilots, with their wives, who were longtime friends. Two pilots were training for their second combat tour, and the other had recently returned from DaNang. Somehow, they managed to find out where I had gone down. With their knowledge of search and rescue, they were able to construct for Sharon a reassuring image of what was probably taking place, and why—nearly half a world away. They secretly held no hope for rescue.

* * *

I transmitted 15 seconds of beeper, then switched to voice. *This is Falcon Eight-Four, on the ground and O.K. Anybody read?* No answer. I repeated the call—same results. I kept the receiver on for two or three minutes, heard nothing, so settled down for another two hours of waiting.

Earlier I had heard some unnatural whistling sounds. Now I could hear them again, further in the distance, like a child's toy train. Cub could hear them clearly, for they were on either side of him, apparently signals among the searching enemy troops.

Ten p.m. I repeated the radio call—no answer. Again I listened for awhile, but heard nothing.

Midnight, 2 a.m., same calls, same disheartening results. After each transmission throughout the night, I followed with a call to Cub, but there was no reply. I rationalized that I heard no answers because of the rugged terrain—perhaps someone had heard me.

Around 4 a.m., a jet passed overhead. I grabbed my radio and switched it on.

Falcon Eight-Four, this is Owl One-Three. Do you read?

One-Three, Eight-Four Alpha, you're loud and clear.

Rog, Eight-Four, you O.K.?

I'm O.K., you're the first guy I've talked to all night. Heard anything from Bravo?

Negative. We're bingo fuel, got to leave. Owl One-Five will be "on" in a few minutes. Weather's looking better from here, how's it look down there?

It's pitch black down here, One-Three, can't see a thing, but it's stopped raining.

Owl One-Five arrived a few minutes later. I had no luck talking to him, but I could hear all his calls. I finally gave up to save batteries.

At 6 a.m. I heard the "beautiful" propeller sounds of an A1E Sky-raider—the "Sandys" were back.

Falcon Eight-Four, this is Sandy Zero-Three.

Rog, Zero-Three, Eight-Four Alpha, read you five-by.

We're about 10 minutes out, Alpha, how's the weather look?

By this time the sky was getting bright in the east, and I could see a few clouds near the hilltops and a layer of cloud higher above.

Looks like a little low scud and a middle deck above, Sandy. I think you can get under it.

I'm under it now. Alpha, give me a hold down.

I held my transmitter open to give him a bearing. When I released the radio button, I heard a most welcome voice.

Sandy Zero-Three, this is Eight-Four Bravo.

Those were the first words heard from Cub in 12 hours. He said he was O.K. and that there had been no movement around him since 3 a.m. Perhaps the "Gomers" were gone—or perhaps they were waiting.

I tore down my little shelter and moved up to the ridge top. Within minutes, Sandy Zero-Three and his playmate, Zero-Four, had us both pinpointed. Then they busied them-

selves making sure the area was clear of "Gomers."

Eight-Four, the choppers will be here in 20 minutes. We're going to make a few low passes around you, let us know if you hear shooting.

The next few minutes were like a World War II movie: two prop fighters, roaring up and down the valley, over the ridge tops, and down the valley again, and again—closely checking the area for the presence of enemy forces, before the helicopters came in. But there was no ground fire—all was peaceful.

Eight-Four, we're going out to meet the Jolly Greens now. We'll be back shortly.

The Sandys disappeared into the distance for a few minutes, then I heard the distinctive, "Whop, whop, whop," of the choppers—the Jolly Green Giants.

Jolly, this is Eight-Four Alpha.

Rog, Alpha, give us a hold down.

Eight-Four, Sandy Zero-Three. We're going to put some "Willie Pete" in to mark the way.

Rog, Sandy. Each white phosphorous smoke rocket went off with a "Phump." The last one hit in the ravine below me. I had no idea how loud a smoke rocket could be. The Jollies were close now, but still out of view.

Alpha, we're going to pick you up first and then get Bravo.

Roger, Alpha copies.

Bravo, roger.

Cub had been pretty quiet, and didn't share the guarded exhilaration I now felt. His fall from the tree and his close brushes with the enemy, gave him an understandably more pessimistic outlook. He felt that the "Gomers" were waiting for the chopper to hover—and then they were going to "open up"—a simple trap used many times before.

Another hold down, Alpha.

Alpha holding.



In a rare, quiet moment Lieutenant Colonel, then Major, Priest relaxes before a mission.



ABOVE: Sharon Priest, waited in Victorville, Calif., for news of her downed husband. After rescue there was a happy mixture of laughter and tears.
BELOW: Gerri, Jeff, and Marti Priest also waited for news of their father.



O.K., pop a red smoke, Alpha.

Roger, smoke.

I pulled the smoke end of my flare. Thick clouds of bright red color drifted straight ahead, disappearing into the trees.

That smoke will come out short of my position.

Rog, Alpha, got your smoke.

I could see the helicopter now, about 100 yards away and moving closer to me.

Come 50 yards right, Jolly Green.

The pilot was hovering now, a little to my right, with the belly of his chopper pushed into the treetops. I could see the hoist operator standing in the door and waved wildly at him, but he could not see me. I lit the bright end of my flare, and down came the jungle penetrator. I scrambled to it, pulled out a safety strap, folded down a petal seat, and climbed on. One yank on the cable, and I was on the way up. Downwash from the rotor was terrific, knocking big branches and leaves down with a 100 mph force. Then, strong hands pulled me through the door into the chopper. All I could do was grin. The feeling of being out of that jungle was beyond words.

The chopper circled around and came to hover again. Within four minutes of my pick up, Cub was sitting beside me. It was noisy inside the Jolly, and difficult to talk to each other or the crew. Smiles, sign language, and lip reading said it all—there was no question about how everyone felt.

* * *

At 7 p.m. in Victorville, Sharon's telephone rang. It was a call from the Personnel Center in Texas.

"I have some good news for you, Mrs. Priest—your husband is in the helicopter . . ."

There was a happy mixture of laughter and tears—and someone went out for champagne.