

25Nov71

On 25 November 71 Jolly Green 70 and 73 were scrambled out of the Bien Hoa FOL for a Navy CH-46 shot down ninety miles south with twenty-one people on board. Major problems encountered enroute were navigation being hampered by low ceilings and poor visibility. As a result both aircraft, forced to fly at 100-300 feet AGL, were exposed to enemy ground fire as they approached the down helicopter. King advised the Jollies to withdraw to a safe holding point to await area preparation. Major Robert B. Swench the Alpha Low AC on Jolly Green 70 was advised that Dustoff and Sea Wolf helicopters had extracted seven injured survivors and that his assistance would be required to pickup the remaining personnel. Jolly Green 70 rendezvoused with SEA Wolf helicopter and was briefed on the SAR situation. Approach and landing at the crash site here without incidents and fourteen survivors taken on board. The Jollies proceeded to Binh Thy to unload the survivors and assess battle damage. Jolly Green 70 discovered five hits and Jolly Green 73 one, but the damage wasn't critical and the return to Bien Hoa was begun.

The weather had deteriorated and both aircraft were again forced to fly low. After transiting through a heavy rain shower Capt. Richard L. Wall, Jolly Green 73 AC, lost all visual and radio contact with Jolly Green 70. A run through of all normal frequencies proved fruitless and Jolly Green 73 proceeded to Bien Hoa for fuel.

On the ground it was determined that Jolly Green 70 had crashed in the Son Nha Bhe River at the same position where visual contact had been lost. Several aircraft were already in the suspected SAR area and Jolly Green 73 launched to join them. Despite poor weather Capt Wall and crew spotted a survivor, Pararescueman AIC Richard L. Steed, on the river bank and an immediate pick-up was made. The search was continued and it was learned that a Navy helicopter had rescued the Flight Engineer, Sgt Hank L. Theriot, who had been taken to Vung Tau. Low fuel finally forced Capt Wall to return to Bien Hoa. Subsequent search and investigation revealed that Jolly Green 70 had been downed by enemy ground fire.

HH-53 shootdown. 37th ARRS A/C operating out of Bien Hoa FOL. 3 KIA, 1 MIA, 1 recovered by HH-43.

TECHNICAL SERGEANT JAMES R. THOMAS/AIRMAN FIRST CLASS THOMAS D. PROSE. Sergeant Thomas and Airman Prose are crewmembers on an HH53 from the 37th ARRS at DaNang AB, RVN. The crew is on an airborne alert orbit near Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, and is returning to base. Believing the area to be relatively benign, they are flying just above a lazy, meandering, rice paddy-flanked river. Suddenly, enemy ground fire erupts, impacting the cockpit area. The pilot is immediately killed. Since the huge helicopter is so close to the surface, there is no time for the copilot to react. The helicopter noses over and crashes into the river. A SAR is immediately initiated with an accompanying air armada of close air support aircraft, gunships, and other Jolly Greens. The search for survivors lasts for several days, and in the process, all bodies except Sergeant Thomas' is recovered. He is listed as killed in action/body not recovered.

A memento from the Vietnam Wall which is now displayed in the Museum of American History in Washington D.C. The unsigned handwritten note reads as follows: "fall 1971, 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery, Jolly Green Giants. Pararescuemen James Thomas and Thomas Prose were at Jolly Green FOL at Bien Hoa when they were scrambled to rescue the crew and PAX from a downed army Chinook in the Delta. After the successful recovery of the Army personnel to their base the HH-53 was returning to Bien Hoa, RVN when they were shot down and crashed and sank in the Na Be River. There were two survivors; PJ Rich Steed and FE Theriqux. The helicopter was raised by Navy barge but the shackle broke and it fell back into the river with the bodies still in their gunner belts. Due to the VC activity they remain there to this date."