

Downed fighter pilot plucked from jungle

TAN SON NHUT -- One of the most dramatic air rescues in recent months took place in Laos recently when an Air Force F-105 Thunderchief pilot was retrieved after his aircraft was downed by a surface to air missile (SAM) near the Mu Gia Pass.

A harrowing 20 hours for the pilot on the ground in Laos preceded his rescue. A second crewmember aboard the Thunderchief is listed as missing in action.

The pilot, Maj. Robert E. Belli, was supporting an interdiction mission about eight miles northwest of the pass when his aircraft was downed by a SAM from the North Vietnamese side of the border. Search and rescue (SAR) units were immediately notified of the crash and sped to the area.

The major had successfully ejected and the SAR force found him in hostile territory. Air Force SAR aircraft established both voice and beeper contact with the pilot of the downed aircraft, who reported he was in a secure position although enemy troops were in the area.

Due to the deterioration of the weather, SAR aircraft were unable to extract the pilot before darkness, and he spent the night on the ground. He reported he had a broken arm and possibly a broken leg but there was little the rescue force could do for him until the weather broke. The major did report however, that he had not been detected by the enemy and that he had a complete survival kit before the decision to postpone the rescue was made.

Throughout the night, an orbiting HC-130 kept in contact with the major, at the same time searching for

some sign of the second man in the F-105 crew, while Air Force fighter-bombers kept the enemy from reaching the pilot.

The rescue force was back the following morning, and at 8:11 a.m. one of the A-1 Skyraiders reported seeing the major and led an HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant to the area.

One helicopter made the pickup while another stood by, ready to take over should the first Jolly Green come under enemy fire. Suppressive fire by the supporting aircraft allowed the helicopter to make the pickup on the first try. MSgt. Leon Fullwood, a pararescue specialist, was lowered into the heavily wooded area on the jungle penetrator. He helped the injured Major Belli onto the device and the two were hoisted to the hovering HH-53. Capt. William L. Burner III, the flight surgeon aboard the Jolly Green, treated Major Belli's injuries on the return flight to base.

After the successful rescue, Major Belli explained that there had been a jolt and his F-105 aircraft lost altitude immediately and banked sharply. "I bailed out," the major said, "and landed on a hillside in deep jungle. It was the longest and loneliest night of my life. I can't thank the rescue guys enough. Hearing the choppers moving it was the greatest sound I've ever heard."

Other members of the crew of the HH-53 making the rescue were: Maj. Kenneth E. Ernest, aircraft commander; Capt. Joel L. Summers, pilot; Sgt. John C. Repper, flight engineer; and pararescuemen TSgt. Kelsey R. Adams and Sgt. Paul C. Perry.



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U.S. Air Force Photo by Sgt Martin Cavazos

Major Belli is carried from the HH-53 helicopter following his rescue