

11Dec71 Ashcan 01B SAR

[Bob Laymon](#)   TODAY IN SEA AIR WAR HISTORY ➤ Saturday, 11 December 1971

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An HH-53C (Call sign "Jolly Green 30") from the 40th ARRS, crewed by Maj. Kenneth Ernest (P), Joel L. Summers (CP), John C. Repper (FE), Leon Fullwood (PJ), Kelsey R. Adams (PJ) and Kenneth E. Ernest (PJ), rescued the pilot of a F-105G (Call sign "Ashcan 01 Bravo") Maj.

Robert E. Belli after he and his WSO- Lt. Col. Scott Winston McIntire had ejected from their SAM damaged aircraft over the Mụ Giạ Pass on Friday, 10 December 1971.

   The rescue of "Ashcan 01-Bravo" marked the first time an IFR recovery had been made. Maj. Ernest had found a hole in the cloud cover, about two miles from the survivor, and let down to treetop level, then hovered from treetop-to-treetop, with guidance from his crew and vectors from the survivor, taking almost an hour to a point where he could make the pickup.

Maj. Belli described being able to see the belly of the HH-53C and the PJ on the hoist coming down to get him, but said he could not see any more of the helicopter than the aircraft's belly as the rest of it was in the clouds.

"Where do we find such men?"

Lt. Col. Scott Winston McIntire was KIA.

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Citation

"On a Steel Horse I Ride" by Darrel D. Whitcomb

& "PJ's in Vietnam" by [@Robert Lapointe](#)

In December (1971) 40th crews at NKP were scrambled to rescue an F-105G crew (Ashcan 01) and F-4 crew (Gunfighter 82) downed near Mu Gia Pass and an F-4 crew (Falcon 74) downed in northeastern Laos. All missions were long, involved, and dangerous and tasked the crews and machines to the limit. As a result of their efforts and the efforts of supporting A-1s and FACs,

one man from the F-105G ...was recovered and sent home. However, those successes were not just blind luck. They were the result of some other improvements made to rescue forces in general in the theater.

When the 40th was moved to NKP, it was then based with several other key and developing components of the overall SAR force. The 1st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), the remaining USAF A-1 (Skyraider) unit, was also stationed there. Its primary mission was SAR support, and it kept several aircraft on alert at all times for SAR tasking.

The 3d ARRG had a command and control center there, call sign Joker, which provided critical command and control and liaison for the various SAR forces. Joker had an intelligence section, and during 1971, it established a critical intelligence link to Task Force Alpha (TFA), also located at NKP. TFA commanded and controlled all of the sensors implanted along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other areas of SEA. The data that it was collecting could be very useful in real time for SAR missions. As missions occurred, Joker began asking TFA for data, which it then began passing out to the rescue and support squadrons and/or briefing directly to the crews as they prepared for their missions. Additionally, Joker procured secure radios, giving TFA the capability to pass intelligence by voice via secure communications to the aircrews in their aircraft, which had compatible equipment. This node was in full bloom for the December SARs.

Also stationed at NKP was the 23d TASS. This FAC unit currently flew the OV-10 and patrolled over large sections of Laos and Cambodia. Like all FAC units, its pilots were able to initiate and support SARs as a basic skill. Recently, though, 15 of its OV-10s had been highly modified with some new and exciting technology. The aircraft were equipped with the Pave Spot, an optical system that the weapons systems operator (WSO) in the backseat ran. It was designed to provide magnification for better visual reconnaissance along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Built into the Pave Spot was a laser designation system that allowed the WSO to illuminate a target with an energy beam so that a laser-guided bomb (LGB) could track the beam to the designated target. This system was proving to be extremely useful against trucks and supplies along the trail. It was also effective for destroying anti-aircraft guns, something of great use in SARs.

Additionally, the 15 OV-10s were equipped with a long-range aid to navigation (LORAN) system, a precise (for its day) navigational device integrated into the Pave Spot system. When a target was designated on the ground with a laser beam, the crew would get a LORAN readout on its exact location, which could be expressed in either a military grid system or geographical coordinates. Those coordinates could be passed to another LORAN-equipped aircraft. That aircraft could then be flown to that point to drop bombs or cluster bomb units (CBU) on the position through the weather with reasonable accuracy. These CBUs could also be area-denial ordnance that could protect the survivor for a period of time until the rescue forces could arrive.

If the delivering aircraft was dropping a bomb capable of being guided by the laser beam from the OV-10, the LGB could be dropped through the weather, and then guided to the target by the laser designator on the "Pave Nail" OV-10s, as they came to be called. The use of a laser/LORAN combined system proved an effective way to deliver bombs through the weather, even for precision delivery, and to destroy anti-aircraft guns.

Beyond this, though, it did not take the crews long to realize the value of the laser/LORAN combination not only in SAR situations for finding and pinpointing survivors but also for leading non-LORAN equipped aircraft at least to the area of the survivor, where they could then use their own limited navigational systems. Effectively, this meant that the Pave Nail could provide the precision navigation that was lacking on the LNRS aircraft. While not the optimum solution, certainly, this capability was a definite battlefield expedient until the HH-53Cs could be equipped with LORAN or some other long-range precision navigational device.

Very soon, young officers from the various squadrons at NKP were holding informal conferences to compare tactics and to explore how these new technological advances could be used in the SAR arena. Such extemporaneous meetings led to many “bar-napkin agreements” among the participants as they jotted down their ideas in the various unit “hooch bars.” The Nails proposed that the Pave Nail aircraft should be called in early in any SAR situation to quickly determine the exact survivor position. They even developed a procedure whereby in bad weather that prevented visual search, they could use a collection of automatic-direction-finding cuts taken from a survivor’s radio using precisely recorded LORAN positions to calculate a location within 1,000 meters—accurate enough to enable SAR operations in instrument flight rule (IFR) conditions. The crews then used three-dimensional tactical maps of the area and literally planned a best approach to the survivor’s location through the weather, which could then be used by the Jolly Green crew in a Pave Imp-equipped aircraft.

The after action report written for the Ashcan 01 SAR mission explained how this procedure was accomplished to recover the one survivor:

The SAR [task force] arrived back at the scene at [5:45 a.m.] . . . and awaited first light. Major [Ken] Ernest’s crew in Jolly Green 30 (Jolly Low) secured a Doppler fix [determined by a Pave Nail] from over the survivor’s position to aid in returning to him and . . . descended through a hole in the clouds and began searching. Beginning his run-in to Ashcan 01[A] from about two miles southwest, Major Ernest was IFR, and required assistance in locating the survivor. The assistance was provided by a Sandy [A-1] and Pave-Nail.

The Jolly crew members spotted the body of the F-105G WSO, but he was clearly dead. No recovery attempt was made.

Instead, they overflew him to get the pilot. The report continued to say that “the coordination between the Jolly, the Pave-Nail, and the Sandy resumed as Jolly Green 30 continued to inch its way toward the [pilot] until a hover was established over [the pilot]. Approximately one hour had been spent in mostly IFR weather.” The survivor then spotted them.

He recalled, “I could see the penetrator with the PJs coming down, and I could see the bottom of the helicopter, but the top of it was in the clouds. I thought that the chopper pilot must be having one helluva tough time trying to hover there, with the gusty wind, and him just about IFR. Anyway, they got me on the penetrator and pulled me aboard.”