

By Capt. Bob Phillips

NAKHON PHANOM RTAFB, Thailand —
“Beeper, beeper, come up voice...”

These words, uttered over a special frequency by an on-scene aircraft, means just one thing. A search and rescue mission has begun for an air crewman who has just been forced to bail out over hostile territory.

The “beeper” is a sort of mechanical “May Day” or international distress signal transmitted by a small radio which each air crewman carries as part of his survival gear. Activated shortly after bailout, it emits a high-pitched wail immediately recognized by all aircrews.

But to be properly identified, the downed pilot must also transmit certain information by voice, and it is this “come up voice” that the on-scene aircraft is requesting.

When a SAR is initiated, all available combat air operations in Southeast Asia turn to support the downed airman’s rescue and recovery. An C-130 Hercules coordinates communications during the rescue effort.

But the pilot who calls the shots is flying a post-World War II prop-driven fighter known as an A-1 Skyraider. During a SAR he is the on-scene commander, with the call sign “Sandy.”

The basic design of the A-1 Sandy makes it ideal for the hazards of search and rescue. Carrying about two tons of ordnance of a wide variety, it can respond to whatever trouble it may encounter. It can loiter in the SAR area for three to five hours and, above all, it’s durable and reliable. In fact, Sandy’s very lack of speed enables it to stay in close to the survivor, and deliver its arsenal with pin-point accuracy.

When Sandies are scrambled to the SAR area, they form into two elements. One element escorts the “Jolly Greens” while the other goes for the survivor to direct the entire on-scene rescue operation. Pilots of the second element must first locate the downed airman. Their job

is hazardous and demanding, as their own lives and the lives of survivors rest upon their skill and ability.

The Sandy acting as on-scene commander must be constantly “on station” during most hours of a SAR. He acts as a sort of quarterback, directing an aerial offensive team toward the goal of a successful recovery. He can call upon forward air control aircraft or jet fighters, or use his own firepower to assist in knocking out hostile groundfire.

It’s the Sandy designated as on-scene commander who finally makes the decision to call in helicopters for final pickup. Other Sandy aircraft escort the Jollys to and from the survivor, and form a “daisy chain” during the helicopter hover and pickup, laying down a continuous blanket of ordnance.

Perhaps because of the age, slow speed and probable lack of glamour, the A-1 Sandy story has been left largely untold. But to the survivor who “comes up voice” and whose life is on the line, and to the helicopters they protect, A-1 Sandies render far more than SAR support—they provide SAR salvation.