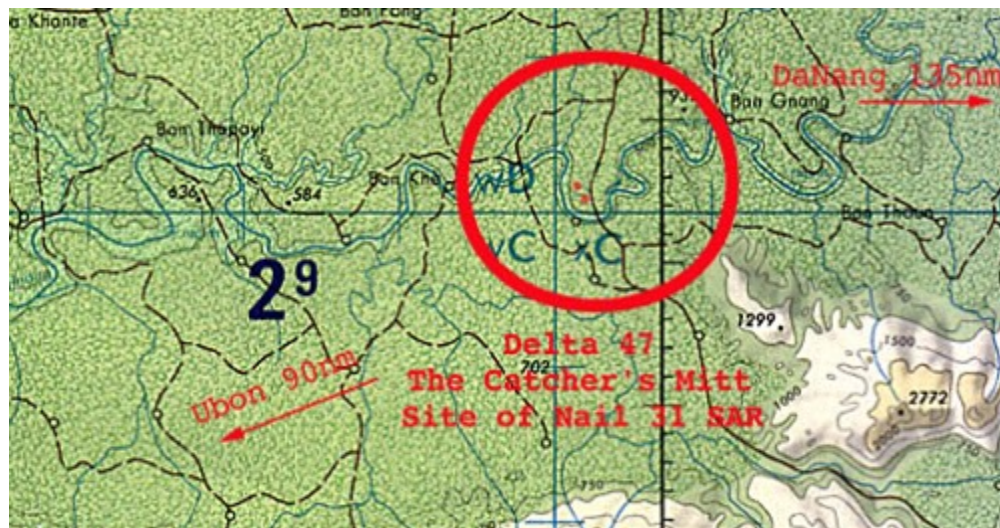


18Mar72

Bob Laymon is with Byron Hukee

March 19, 2020 ·

☰☛☰ **TODAY IN SEA AIR WAR HISTORY** ➤ Saturday, 18 March / Sunday 19 March 1972
The Rescue of Nail 31A&B



Captain Randy Jayne's recollection of the Nail 31 SAR.

The day the Nail [31] went down, I was on the schedule for a normal Barrel Roll close air support strike mission, with 56th SOW Commander Col. Jack Robinson as my wingman. When the SAR kicked off, we were re-rolled as the SMOKE flight, with wall to wall M-47 WP bombs. Col R was quite excited, because even though he was a highly decorated Korean fighter pilot, he had never flown on a SAR (not having ever checked out as a Sandy).

While we were briefing, Mike Faas was shot down, then picked up, and Don Morse [Milner] had his MAJOR battle damage. Our own pucker factor, then, was higher than I think it had ever been before, at least for me. The next memorable (but trivial) event occurred on level-off at 12,000 feet in our flight of two. When I reached to pull the prop level back from 2800 rpm to cruise setting, I discovered that the linkage had broken and the lever simply flopped back and forth in my hand. Because four Sandys were on scene, and because we had no way of knowing how timely the need for smoke might be, I sent Smoke 45 on to the scene, and I rtb'ed to NKP. I landed, shut down, and watched as the crew chief spent all of four or five minutes removing a panel, locating a missing cotter pin, re-pinning the linkage, and giving me a thumbs

up. At the same time, the guys topped off my main fuselage fuel tank (the only one I had used at that point.

I arrived on scene, then, some 45-50 minutes behind my wingman, and held and listened while the Sandys (who were they?) worked the scene. All of us had this really uncomfortable feeling. We could not see the infamous gun, he would not shoot, and yet he had hit three and brought down two airplanes already. At some point about three hours into this, the Sandys bingoed out. The next Sandys arrived around 1700, and for some reason, passed on-scene command to me, since I was the Sandy lead who had been there all afternoon, albeit flying with the Smoke call sign.

At this point in the story, my blood pressure started to rise, for reasons which will become clear. Col Robinson and I, talked to the two survivors (one of whom was Dave Breskman, and I forget the pilot's name [Steve Boretsky]), tried to carefully check out a South to North run-in path, "trolling" at a couple of hundred feet and looking closely for any signs of a gun emplacement or even small arms fire. Everything was quiet, and I talked to the lead Jolly, a great aviator whom I had flown two SAR's with previously. He was headed back out to the safe orbit-escorted by the two Sandies with us-- to refuel, and we agreed to conduct a classic run-in at absolute treetop level, complete with smoke, for a last-light pickup attempt. We were reasonably sure, based on the survivors' good sense of direction, that the big gun was indeed on the other (North) side of their position. We agreed that a treetop hover should keep the Jolly terrain-masked from the gunner's depressed line of sight.

Great plan, great team, time to execute. Col. R. dropped his smoke first, and put it absolutely exactly on the mark, making it very easy for me to follow suit. The Jolly started the run-in as briefed, escorted by the two Sandys, while we two set up a tight orbit and looked all around for the gun. It was near dusk, and at the point that the HH-53 was about 8000 feet out, surrounded by the smoke, I realized that something was very wrong. Instead of flying at an altitude which caused the rotor wash to beat down the tops of the trees, the Jolly was moving along at at least 150-200 feet above the tops of the trees. Both I and the Sandys were literally yelling at the Jolly, but to no effect. As the first survivor called out a tally ho at about 400 yards, and with me in a painfully good position to watch, the obvious occurred.

The North Vietnamese 37mm gunner, clearly amazed at this 60,000 pound shooting gallery target moving along at all of 30 knots, opened fire. As all of us who have climbed all over a 37mm gun know, the clip has a 6-8 shot capacity. I actually watched the large tracers come so close to the helicopter that from my vantage point, it appeared that a round or two literally passed through the rotor's circular path! In one of my best personal miracles, I watched the gunner-who had proven he could hit three aircraft moving much faster than this Jolly-MISS! The HH-53 immediately

aborted out to the South, ending our attempt. With no smoke, limited daylight, and an intense anger at the "airmanship" we had witnessed, we started to take everyone home.

As we did, both Col Robinson—who was at this point below bingo, having been airborne almost an hour longer than me—and the on-scene OV-10 Nail both said that they thought they could pinpoint the gun, since unlike me, they had been looking from the East or West, and had a better perspective. After a quick discussion, both the Nail and Smoke 45 rtb'ed for fuel, and I made one last effort to accomplish something in what had been an otherwise fruitless day. Two Navy A-7's, who had orbited above us and "watched the whole thing", indicated that they had four MK-82's each, and would like to jettison them on what we thought to be the gun emplacement. Since I had no forward firing ordnance at all except 20mm, I made one LONG RANGE straffing "run" ("tracer lob" would be a more accurate descriptor—If Nail 31, Mike Faas, and Don Morse had been unlucky, I had no desire to get too close to this guy!).

As sometimes happens, one Spad driver and two Navy SLUF guys reached unanimous agreement as to where we thought the gun was. The lead A-7 rolled in during what I remember as "deep dusk", and dropped about 200 feet to one side of the target. I gave his wingman my best Hurlburt imitation of a real FAC, right down to the color commentary, and Two proceeded to drop an absolute shack, with multiple small secondary explosions. At that point, out of gas, ideas, ordnance, and patience, we all went home.

My next two recollections are diametrically different. First, I stormed TUOC in search of the Jolly pilot, to politely ask what on earth had gone on. I was met by the Ops Officer from the Jollies, in tow with the lead Jolly pilot, whom I had thought was "flying" the pickup attempt. The two of them told me what had happened, and if Joseph Heller had heard this story four decades ago, there would have been another chapter in "Catch 22". It seems that while on the refueling boom, the lead Jolly (Captain) was "told" by the backup Jolly, that they would switch positions, so that the number two Jolly could make the pickup. That second pilot was in fact a senior officer who had for a few months been in the unit at NKP, but had been reassigned to a desk in Saigon at 7th AF. It was this individual—sitting alert that day to get his monthly sortie and combat pay—who "flew" the almost fatal "high altitude profile", with no notification to the on-scene commander (me) about having ordered the switch. Let me end this part of the story by noting the all of this was not in any way lost on Colonel Jack Robinson, and the Jolly pilot, although not part of our Special Ops chain of command, never flew a combat mission again, at least not anywhere near the "real war".

Now for the good news story-A first light launch of a new Sandy and Jolly team arrived on scene, recreated the night before's run-in tactic exactly, picked up both guys, and come back to the ramp at NKP for a huge celebration. I won't try to re-tell the part about Dave Bretsky bringing back an AK-47-that is a "whole different war story".

From my standpoint, Nail 31 had a lot of lessons learned-the Nails knew their survival stuff, and it saved them. I reinforced something a lot of Sandies had learned before-just because you launch as a Smoke bird, keep your head in the game, because somebody may put you in charge. Third, even a well conceived plan can come apart quickly due to lack of attention to detail or execution. But, finally, even royal screwups benefit from big doses of luck on occasion-on that afternoon, we really did!

Randy Jayne

Captain Ron Smith's recollection of the Nail 31 SAR.

I remember watching the first 4 ship to launch on the SAR on the 18th. About 2 hours later we heard that Mike Faas had been shot down and picked up by Air America. We went through one group of Sandies after another that day with most of the work being to find the area, and suppress the numerous guns. The weather was terrible. It was the dry season, and the fields were being burned. You could hardly see your wingman much less other aircraft.

I was scheduled about mid day of the following day (19th Mar) with Scotty as my wingman. We had gone through so many people he was the only wingman with crew rest. This would not have been an issue except he had just returned from leave, and had not flown in over 2 weeks. We launched as Sandy low and wingman replacements. It was difficult to find the location in the smoke, but thanks to great briefings from the previous Sandys we found the area.

Two Nails in the middle of the Catchers Mitt. Most ground fire at that time came from north of the Catchers Mitt river. The survivors had not heard anything from their immediate vicinity for some time. I remember that one of them had an NVA walk up to where he was hiding, and he shot him. After getting his AK47, he crawled to a new hiding place. I decided it was now or never, and called for a smoke flight to seal off the river with the intent of bringing the Jolly and Sandy escort in from the south. The smoke flight never made it -- they got lost and God only knows where they went.

We were flying no higher than 100ft to avoid the guns to the north. At one point a 14.5 got my range and sent a long salvo in front of me. That low and already in a turn away, there was little I could do. His last round went through the nose cone of my right LAU 3 pod. He must have run out of his clip. We were also worried about fuel, and so I forgot I was on my tip tank. Suddenly everything got real quiet as my engine quit at 100ft. It really is amazing how training comes back quickly. I went to the boost pump, switched tanks, and turned the pump back on -- the engine immediately started. The survivors were really worried about that as they told me later -- they thought another person on the ground would delay their pickup.

After briefing the pick up team on my intentions, and getting ready to execute, King advised that there was only 1 Jolly in the area, and they recommended we wait. Another bad idea from King. The execution called for Scotty and me to head south while the Jolly and Sandy escort headed east. The plan was to rendezvous at a point marked by a WP bomb. There was the only thing you could hope to see. We arrived at the designated point, I dropped the bomb, and within 3 minutes the Jolly had it in sight. We then executed a daisy chain around the jolly on the reverse heading from the one we had gone out on. We had to use heading and time to get back since visibility was so bad. We picked up the survivor closest to the river first, and then the other. We got fire from north of the river as expected, but were all flying really low so they could not hit us.

The egress was also low until we got back to the original rendezvous point. On the way out we marked the way for the Jolly by launching WP rockets every time we passed the Jolly. After reaching the rendezvous point we climbed and headed west with no opposition. Although the mission only lasted a little more than 3 hours, I did not have enough gas to make it all the way back to NKP. Had to land at a Lima sight (can't remember the name, but we had several Raven FACs there).

Ron Smith

Captain Buck Buchanan's recollection of the Nail 31 SAR.

I had asked Buck via email whether John Lackey was awarded the Air Force Cross for his role in the Nail 31 SAR.

By-----John did get the AF Cross for his role as Sandy One on the first lighter on the second day. IMHO it was, in a big part, because of John that both survivors were rescued later that day. I was scheduling the first day and we were running short of qualified aircrews and it didn't help that everyone was getting the shit shot out of them. Lackey had already flown his champagne flight 3 or 4 days before the SAR. He was hanging around TUOC and came over to the ops. shop and asked how scheduling was going. I told him that I was starting to get strapped for crews if the SAR turned into a first lighter. He said you are really short of Sandy Leads --huh? I said yup and he said what about me? I said you have already flown your sawadee flight and turned in your stuff. He said shit I can go get the xx###** stuff! So I said I would check with the powers that be (I think it was Jim Harding) and if it was okay; then I would put him up as Sandy Low for the first lighter. I asked who do you want on your wing? He answered what are you doing? I think I gulped and said I'd be glad to be on your wing.

You probably know the rest of the story. I have the narrative from my Silver Star that I could dig out but here is an over-view. We took off in the dark and climbed on top of a, as I remember, 1500 to 2000 ft overcast. We got to the mitt and John talked to the Nail on scene and found out that both A and B were okay and that A was the proud new owner of an AK. John said to me okay 2 it might be a little cramped down there so you stay up here and I will go down and take a look. I thought right then, holy shit, this guy has big balls. He wasn't down there very long and the survivors started telling him they could hear bad guys shooting at him. He then figured he had better get me down there to check his six. I came down and he trolled around and I watched and called out ground fire. There were some guys with RPG's that were harassing him and they were relatively easy for us to take care of. John knew where a 37mm was that was too close for fast-movers and he and the survivors thought there was another gun around close. Although we weren't shot at by the 37mm (we were pretty low) John put ordinance on it while I covered him. While we were doing that a 14.5mm came up on John and I just happened to be in position to get a good sighting of it and was able to put two LAU-3 pods of HEI on it. In retrospect that was a little over-kill but there was a lot of adrenalin flowing at the time. By this time we were both getting close to bingo and we thought we had the close guns killed so, as I recall, we put some strafe down around the survivors (B thought he could hear some bad guys close by.) [I was just interrupted by an ambulance call for 2 1/2 hrs.] If I recall correctly we were replaced by Ron Smith, but it seems like there were another pair of Sandys in there between Ron and us.

I flew with John some during check-out and always had a lot of respect for him as a pilot and a man. One thing is certain, you always knew where you stood with him.

-Buck

Postscript: Air Force Cross winner Capt. John Lackey died while flying an A-7D Corsair with the New Mexico Air National Guard in 1978.