

10Apr72 A-6 SAR Laos



Today in SEA History

Monday, 10 April 1972:

Operation "Freedom Train"

"Setting Up the Rescue"

by Colonel James C. Harding, U.S. Air Force (Retired)

The A-6 *Intruder* went down in one of the hottest segments of the Ho Chi Minh Trail - in Laos between the Tchepone area and the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Several aircraft had recently been shot down by AAA near there, and the AAA was our first concern, because Bengal 505 Alpha was in a box surrounded by heavily defended roads with over lapping AAA coverage. He was within range of two surface-to-air (SAM) sites, less than five minutes from a North Vietnamese MiG base - and there was a low, solid cloud deck over the area.

The experienced Jolly Green pilots concluded that it would be impossible to get him out unless we neutralized the AAA. I decided to fly the rescue force above the clouds to the site, let down, make the pick-up, then climb back on top and depart. The 7th Air Force vetoed this plan and stipulated that the HH-53s would hold in a relatively safe area until the Sandys could locate the survivor and suppress the AAA.

We went in high on the afternoon of 10 April 1972 - two Jolly Greens, two Nail FACs in OV-10s, HC-130P King personnel, four Sandys, plus F-105G "Iron Hand" aircraft with Shrike antiradiation missiles for the SAM sites and an F-4 MiG combat air patrol to hold off any air-to-

air threat.

Upon arrival in the rescue area, I asked an F-4 "Fast FAC" to locate Smith. After trying to talk me onto him, the F-4 flew low over the position and popped up out of the clouds in front of me.

I left my wingman on top and descended through the overcast. I broke out at about 1,100 feet in the valley - with clouds obscuring the tops of several hills in the area; I'd been lucky. Smith was on a long, flat ridge covered with dense jungle. I flew toward him, and my wingman told me that heavy AAA airbursts were trailing me. The Sandys spent 30 minutes trying to silence the AAA before we called off the rescue for the day.

Back home (NKP), I decided to try to get Major Smith to move away from the heavily defended area. The enemy was too close for him to move; however, and he had dug in near a tree.

On 11 April 1972, the cloud layer began breaking up, the FACs and fighters worked over the AAA, and we shifted to a low-level approach. Then the clouds moved in and we postponed again. Two Sandys dropped "crowd-control" powder that apparently spooked the NVA who were looking for Smith. An intelligence source intercepted radio instructions to the NVA in the area to withhold fire until the rescue was attempted - after which they would attempt to shoot down the slow-moving SAR forces.

We tried again on 12 April 1972. After confirming Smith's position, I made several low-altitude, low-speed passes along the planned helicopter route - trolling for AAA. On the third pass, gun positions on both sides of the intended route opened fire. I saw tracers criss-crossing over the canopy and felt hits in both wings. All four Sandys immediately attacked the gun positions. More trolling revealed other gun positions, so we postponed the rescue once again to let the FACs and fighters attack the AAA.

On 13 April 1972, the FACs and fighters went at it once more, and the SAR forces headed in at low altitude. Two F-105s fired Shrike missiles when the SAM sites turned on their radar. Four additional Sandys were along to beef up the rescue force; they preceded the main rescue force, dropping a string of white phosphorous bombs to the north, south and west of Smith and creating a curtain of smoke about 300 feet high between him and the roads.

The four Sandys escorting the Jolly Green helicopter dropped white phosphorous cluster bomb units (CBU-22) across the east end of the rescue area completing the curtain of smoke around the survivor, and also dropped high-explosive CBU on gun emplacements along the ingress/egress route. Then they escorted the Jolly Green helicopter from the holding point to the survivor.

I knew where Smith was, but could not actually see him. In an effort to help his crewmembers spot the survivor, and to the consternation of the hoist operator, the Jolly Green pilot hovered so low that their rotor blades were chopping off the treetops. Then the hoist operator spotted Smith, began winching him in, and the four Sandy's rolled in to deliver non-stop fire against the NVA on the ground. We took a lot of ground fire on the way out and the Sandys were called on several times to attack AAA positions.

Jim Harding



To All Who Shall See These Presents Greeting:

**This is to Certify that
The President of the United States of America
Authorized by Title 10, Section 8742, United States Code
Takes Pride in Presenting**

THE AIR FORCE CROSS

to

James C. Harding

Major, U.S. Air Force

1st Special Operations Squadron, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand

Date of Action: April 10 - 13, 1972

Citation:

The Air Force Cross is presented to James C. Harding, Major, U.S. Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as an A-1 Tactical Fighter Pilot in Southeast Asia from 10 April 1972 to 13 April 1972. During this period, Major Harding was the on-scene commander of an extremely hazardous and complex search and rescue mission that was attempting to recover a downed American pilot who was located in Laos. Major Harding made repeated passes at low altitude and airspeed, directly over a hostile gun position, in order to draw antiaircraft fire and pinpoint its position. In spite of battle damage to his aircraft, Major Harding repeatedly counterattacked the numerous heavy gun positions, thereby allowing the vulnerable rescue helicopters to effect a safe and successful recovery of the downed pilot. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of the enemy, Major Harding reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

<http://www.veterandefenders.org/harding-bio.htm>