

War Heats Up

Copters to the Rescue

AS AFTIMES WENT to press, reports flowed in of rescue helicopters saving the lives of 12 American airmen following a number of crashes in the jungles of South and North Vietnam and at sea. The rescue activity is increasing, as the air war steps up to meet the North Vietnamese invasion. Accounts of recent saves follow.

TAN SON NHUT AB, Vietnam — First Lt. Ernest (Woody) Clark of the 14th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron evaded capture by North Vietnamese soldiers for more than a week before he was picked up in one of the deepest rescue efforts ever into the north.

Clark was navigator in an RF-4 unarmed reconnaissance plane that was shot down on a mission above the DMZ. Escorted by F-104s, the craft was on a photo mission when four surface-to-air missiles were fired by the enemy.

The pilot evaded the first three but the fourth hit. "The aircraft caught fire and flames were all around me," Clark recalled. He bailed out and watched as the plane exploded and fiery chunks, no bigger than a desk, fell to the ground.

That was on April 20. "I thought it was a nightmare and I'd wake up in my hootch," the lieutenant recalled. But the nightmare was only beginning.

For two days in thick jungle, he hid "frozen" as enemy troops crawled all about him. The second day, he heard aircraft and sounds of battle, and when he tried to move, enemy gunfire pinged about him.

More patrols. More hiding. Finally, on the fourth day, he was able to make radio contact with two F-4s and a helicopter. During a long night, the helicopter orbited his position. But during the night a cold and rainy front

but the rescue planes pulled Clark from the jungle.

On the way back, he ate a can of tuna fish and a bunch of peaches. "That was the best meal I ever had." To his surprise, a huge throng greeted his return to Tan Son Nhut.

"The first thing I did after I left the emergency room was talk to my wife. All she did was cry but it was the most beautiful sound I ever heard."

Clark, a 1969 AF Academy graduate, was flying his 100th combat mission when he was shot down.