

2 April 1972 LaPointe 1st CSAR Easter Sunday So, on April 2nd I finally got my first mission.

It may seem incredible, but since my arrival in Vietnam at the end of April in 1971, I had to wait almost a year to have my first combat rescue mission. I was not unique in this lack of participation in an actual CSAR. The war was winding down when I arrived and U.S. military personnel were being withdrawn from Vietnam in large numbers.

Only 45 USAF aircraft were shot down between 1 July and 31 December 1971. Of these only one USAF aircraft was downed in the 37th ARRS area of responsibility. It was an A-37 shot down 29 November in Cambodia; about 100 miles NNW of Bien Hoa. Four USA UH-1 helicopters downed in South Vietnam also became 37th ARRS SAR missions along with one VNAF UH-1. The last mission was on one of our HH-53's shot down in South Vietnam. So, in the last half of 1971, the 37th only flew on seven combat SAR missions that resulted in saves being credited. Seven missions over six months were shared by approximately 25 PJs assigned to my unit. Only four PJs were on alert each day. So now you can see that the odds of getting on a combat SAR mission during the second half of 1971 was very low.

That does not mean that I was not kept busy. Before I could pull SAR alert duties I had to:

- Get aircrew qualified on the HH-53C & it's minigun weapons system. Flight training began in May 1971 and finished in August 1971
- Attend the Pacific Jungle Survival School in the Philippines completed in November 1971
- Pull at least one week of duty at the 95th Evacuation Hospital triage area completed in December 1971

There was no shortage of PJs at the 37th so the unit was in no hurry to get me fully qualified. I was on the opposite side of that issue and felt an urgent need to get qualified as an alert crewmember. I did everything I could to speed up my qualification. Dave Young and I frequently pestered the duty scheduler to add us to a training flight or to schedule a flight for our training. It took three months of training before we had our check flights which we passed with flying colors. It was in September 1971 that I was scheduled for my first Alpha Alert PJ crewmember. Dave & I both wanted to get a combat mission before the war ended or our unit was deactivated in accordance with President Nixon's draw down plan for U.S. forces in Vietnam.

By the end of 1971, I had flown 106 combat hours in the HH-53. Between the time I was qualified to fly the HH-53 and the beginning of April 1972, I had scrambled many times on a SAR but every one of these scrambles ended with the survivor being rescued by another helicopter that had all ready been airborne and close to the downed pilot.

This shortage of missions changed when the North Vietnamese launched the Easter Offensive in 1972. Suddenly there were many missions in the 37th area of operations and Dave and I flew on several of them. However, on 1 & 2 April, my teammates and I did not even know that the North Vietnamese invasion was in progress. This was a time before computers, the internet, and cell phones. There was no CNN headline news until 1980. News in the 70's commonly took days to be reported. In Vietnam most of our knowledge about the news came from radio. It was broadcasted by the American Forces Vietnam Network. The news we heard in Vietnam was only what the U.S. military wanted us to learn. We also had a daily newspaper that gave us reasonably accurate news from Vietnam and the rest of the world

Today, using the internet, we are in almost instantaneous communication with the entire world. In 1972 communication was much slower; we used radios, telephones, and teletype to communicate. The NVA had crossed the DMZ in the largest invasion of the war. But the men of the 37th ARRS and the rest of the units based at DaNang, still did not know very much about it. One of the reasons for the delay in awareness of the invasion was the weather. It had been raining with very low ceilings and poor visibility. The weather was so bad that the DaNang FAC's who watched for activity every day at the DMZ could not fly because of bad weather. With no FAC's airborne, we had no idea of what was happening at the DMZ. So, the NVA went undetected for a couple of days by the USAF.

In Vietnam, most of the USAF was composed of "high performance" jet aircraft. A few slow moving, propeller aircraft and helicopters were in our Air Force. They were called "low performance" or "slow mover" aircraft. One advantage of the "slow movers" was that they could fly in weather that kept the jets parked on the ground.



On the 2nd of April, the weather was bad but flyable for the FAC's who flew the Cessna O-2 Skymaster. These aircraft were flown by the men of the 20th TASS (Tactical Air Support Squadron) based at DaNang. Also at DaNang were our HH-53 Jolly's, four SAR escort aircraft the A-1E Sandy aircraft, and several squadrons of F-4 jet fighter bomber aircraft.

I was happily on alert this day. At 7 a.m. I had attended my aircrew briefing. Nothing in our briefing indicated that anything unusual was going on. Today I was on Jolly 67 and my crew consisted of Captain Rodney S. Griffith (pilot), Captain Douglas A. Peck (copilot), TSgt Roy D. Prater (FE), A1C Michael A. Aillet (PJ) and myself. We were the low bird and our high bird was Jolly 65 crewed by Major Gerald J. Lange (pilot), Captain Gary A. Dake (copilot), SSgt William A. Simm (FE) and PJs TSgt Allen J. Avery and A1C William R. Pearson. I had flown with all of the guys on alert this day and was more than satisfied that if we had a chance for a SAR, all of our crewmembers would aggressively seek any mission that might occur.

After the briefing I tossed a coin with Airman Aillet to see who would be the #1 PJ. The #1 PJ would be the one to deploy from the helicopter (if needed). The #2 PJ would man the aft gun on the HH-53. The aft gun was the most important gun because it had a 170° field of fire. I never knew any PJ who would volunteer to be the #2 PJ. All of us wanted to be the one to deploy from the helicopter, contact the survivor, and bring him back on board the Jolly Green. I lost the toss

and would become the aft minigun gunner. While I was disappointed, I was still happy to be on alert. I was still waiting for my first combat SAR.

After my aircrew briefing, I signed out my GAU-5 and .38 pistol and picked up my ammunition for these weapons. Our issued weapons were stored in a conex that was positioned next to the hanger Jolly Operations was in. These were the "official" weapons. Most PJs also had other weapons that were not kept in the conex. These guns were kept in our individual lockers and were obtained by trading with U.S. Army troops. Like the majority of PJs I did not like the .38 pistol and had a .45 M-1911 semiautomatic pistol. I also carried a modified M-79 grenade launcher and several hand grenades.

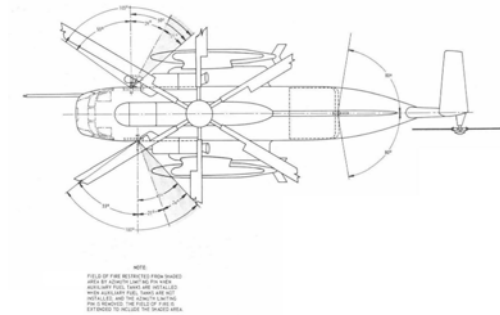
Then Aillet and I brought my gear out to the helicopter using a cart. Our personal gear weighed too much to be hand carried in one load and it was a couple hundred meters from the PJ section to the Alpha alert birds. Our gear included equipment for land and water deployment. Our water gear included SCUBA mask, fins, knife, and LPU's. Also going into the water with us would be our survival vest, survival radio, and signaling gear. Our land gear was much heavier and included as major components of survival vest, load bearing equipment (LBE), a small rucksack, medical kits, and weapons. All of the DaNang PJs carried at least two survival radios, most carried three and a few like myself carried four. Of course we had several spare batteries for these radios. The emphasis on radios was because as long as you had radio contact with SAR forces, someone was going to try and rescue you. The radios were also our best weapon as we could request and direct close air support from the Sandy aircraft or other fighters that might be in the area. Two PJs alert gear easily weighed in at over 500 lbs and hence we needed a cart to move it all out to the alert birds.

After we unloaded the cart, the gear was tied down to prevent it moving in flight. Then we preflighted the helicopter and our assigned minigun. Once we completed the aircraft and minigun preflights, we walked over to the Jolly Ops hanger where inside the hanger there was a plywood structure that was the Pararescue Section. That is where we spent most of our time when on alert.

At 5:30 p.m. the NVA AAA claimed their first victim of the day when they hit the O-2 FAC who had earlier taken off from DaNang AB. The pilot, 1st Lt. Richard Abbot (callsign Mike 81) was hit just north of Quang Tri. He nursed his crippled aircraft over the South China Sea where he bailed out. If as if things were not bad enough for him, during the bailout he broke his arm.

A few minutes after the shoot down, Jolly 67 and Jolly 65 were scrambled and quickly got airborne and proceeded feet wet toward Quang Tri. Weather for take off was 1000 feet overcast and visibility 4 to 6 miles and haze. We flew east over DaNang Bay turning north as we exited the bay. The helicopters flew in formation parallel to the coastline but staying a few miles offshore. This almost eliminated the threat of groundfire except that from small VC/NVA boats that might traversed the area.

Because the SAR objective was feet wet, Airman Aillet, who was the #1 PJ began changing from his uniform to his wetsuit. I also got my water deployment gear on just in case Aillet needed some backup in the water.



At the same time, two A-1E's (Sandy 7 and Sandy 8), led by Captain Don Morse, were scrambled to escort us and provide CAS for us if needed. The 20th TASS also launched another O-2 FAC flown by Captain Icke. So, by 5:40 p.m. a complete SAR task force was enroute.

My pilot Captain Rodney S. Griffith pushed the airspeed of our HH-53 to its maximum of about 148 knots in order to make a fast pickup. The distance to the downed pilot was approximately 80 miles north of DaNang, approximately 3 miles off shore of Quang Tri. Time enroute was about 30-minutes. Our copilot Captain Douglas A. Peck was handling navigation and monitoring SAR radio frequencies. The rest of the crew began the Combat SAR Checklist. I was assigned the aft minigun position and quickly armed the weapon system. By the time our helo cleared DaNang harbor Aillet and I were in our water deployment gear and all three miniguns were ready to test fire. I had pulled all the buttons on my intercom station so that I could hear all of the radio transmissions concerning our mission. I heard a short burst of beeper on the radio and intently listened to guard channel (243.0 mhz) to learn if there was another aircraft in distress. At 5:45 p.m. we were informed by King 22 by radio that a US Navy destroyer had picked up our SAR objective Mike 81. I silently cursed the U.S. Navy for cheating me out of my first combat SAR.

Airman Aillet and I changed back into our camouflage BDU's, donned our survival vest, and then put on our LBE. In addition, I wore a bandoleer of 120 rounds of 5.56 ammunition for my rifle. This was in addition to the 180 rounds in pouches on my LBE and a 30 round magazine that was already inserted into my GAU-5 rifle. I check my M-1911 .45 pistol to ensure a round was chambered and the magazine was fully inserted. Next, I moved my bailout parachute and placed it in the aft minigun tub. That way if I needed it in a hurry it would be within arms reach. I notified my crew that I was ready and manned my minigun position. The FE



Robert LaPointe wearing his combat gear

Jolly 76 the low bird was crewed by.....

King 22 radioed us to continue north and set up a feetwet orbit abeam Quang Tri. There was a strike scheduled around 6 p.m. and King decided it would be wise to keep us nearby. There was also some discussion at 7th AF about us extracting U.S. Army advisors in the area. We slowed down to conserve fuel and arrived at our holding point.

but we were to remain on scene for a possible extraction of US advisers. During this time Bat 21 (EB-66) was reported down 11 NM northwest of Quang Tri and a SAR was initiated.

King 22 ordered us to continue north for a possible extraction of U.S. Army advisors at Quang Tri. Aillet and I changed back into ground deployment gear.

At approximately 6:50 p.m. we heard Blue Ghost 28 a US Army AH-1G Cobra helicopter report over guard frequency that he was hit and he was *going* down. Sunset was only a few minutes away so we needed to act quickly. Blue Ghost 28 reported he had lost tail rotor control and also was losing main transmission oil. As he came out of the mouth of the Cua Viet River JG 67 joined up in formation with him. He reported he was losing his flight controls and was going to land on the beach approximately 2 miles south of the river.

He landed in a marshy area approximately 100 yards inland. I also landed nearby in the marsh and the two survivors were on quickly on board. At 7 p.m. I was air borne again and holding feet wet. At 7:15 p.m. I proceeded to Phu Bai to refuel and drop off the survivors.

By the time refueling was complete it was completely dark and the Bat 21 survivor had been bedded down for the night. At approximately 8 p.m. Jolly Green 67 and 65 returned to DaNang.

Bad weather throughout the day. Ceiling was about 1,000 to 1,500 feet with low clouds, light rain, and poor visibility.

Bat 21 SAR

EB-66 6-man crew hit by SA-2. Only one crewmember ejected before the aircraft exploded. He was LtCol Hambleton, callsign Bat 21B. Hambleton parachuted into the middle of more than 30,000 invading NVA troops. 1st Lt. Bill Jankowski and Capt. Lyle Wilson in an [O-2](#) (Bilk 34) [forward air controller](#) (FAC) aircraft saw Hambleton's plane explode. When Hambleton's [URC-64 rescue radio](#) beeped, Jankowski responded, and was surprised to learn that Hambleton was above him descending in his parachute.^{[7]:29}

Jankowski followed Hambleton down. Hambleton was concealed by a low fog bank as he landed, unseen by the NVA troops.^{[2]:72} As Jankowski observed Hambleton land in a dry [rice paddy](#), his aircraft came under heavy antiaircraft fire. He was astonished at the huge number of NVA troops, equipment, and heavy weapons in the area. Hambleton found refuge in a group of bushes in the middle of the rice paddy. NVA troops were less than 100 metres (330 ft) away. Jankowski fixed Hambleton's location 2 kilometres (1.2 mi) north of the Cam Lo Bridge and just north of TL-88, a major secondary road.

When Capt. Don Morse, flying Sandy 07, first got the call, he thought that because the aircraft had gone down in South Vietnam, the SAR effort could be accomplished fairly quickly.^[4] When he got over Hambleton's position, he was shocked at the amount of ground fire he received. It was more intense than anything he had seen in the war.^{[7]:33} Some pilots reported that the intensity of the antiaircraft fire was equal to that around [Hanoi](#).^{[12]:34} Although the U.S. and ARVN forces did not know it yet, the offensive was the largest [combined-arms](#) attack conducted by the North Vietnamese during the war.^[14]

Morse called for emergency support which was picked up by a [UH-1H slick](#) (Blueghost 39) near Hue, piloted by 1st Lt. Byron Kulland from F Troop, [8th Cavalry](#), [196th Brigade](#). Normally based at [Marble Mountain Air Facility](#) near Da Nang,

two Cobra gunships, Blueghost 28 and 24, and then added Blueghost 30, a second Huey.

two F Troop AH-1 Cobra gunships, call signs Blue Ghost 28 and 24 were on the ground refueling at Phu Bai

Another Huey was also there. Its call sign was Blueghost 30, and was flown by Warrant Officer Ben Nielsen

Blueghost 39 proceeded across the Song Meu Giang 50 feet (15 m) above the ground towards Hambleton's position with the well-armed Blueghost 28 Cobra gunship following about 3,000 feet (910 m) behind and 300 feet (91 m) above. Blueghost 24 waited at the south side of the Song Meu Giang for Blueghost 30 to catch up.^{[7]:35} As soon as Blueghost 39 and 28 crossed the Song Meu Giang, Kulland and Rosebeary's aircraft were met by an immediate curtain of enemy

fire from every direction, hurled against them with an intensity that defied belief. Rosebeary in his Cobra Blueghost 28 responded with rockets and 40mm fire but both helicopters were struck multiple times.

Kulland flying Blueghost 39 tried to turn back south but only managed to crash-land his stricken aircraft, about 6.7 kilometres (4.2 mi) east of Hambleton^[5] and .9 miles (1.4 km) north of the river in an area full of NVA.^{[7]:35} When the helicopter smashed into the ground, the only mobile crew member was SPC5 Jose Astorga, the door gunner, who had been wounded. He tried but was unable to extract other hurt crew members. Paschall was pinned in the wreckage. Frink, who was seriously wounded, urged Astorga to get out and away from the aircraft. A few moments later advancing North Vietnamese soldiers fired on the wreckage with automatic weapons and the aircraft's fuel cell exploded with the remainder of the crew inside.^[10] Astorga was captured but pilots 1st Lt. Byron Kulland and [WO](#) John Frink along with [Sp5c](#) Ronald Paschall were killed.^{[11]:63}

Rosebeary flying Cobra Blueghost 28 called a [Mayday](#) but was able to safely exit the area and landed his severely damaged helicopter. His aircraft was totaled. He and Gunner Warrant Officer Charles Gorski were picked up by a [HH-53C](#) helicopter (Jolly Green 67), without incident.^{[7]:36} Rosebeary warned other aircraft against crossing the river. When Morse in Sandy 07 learned that the quick-snatch had failed, he and his [wingman](#) Sandy 08 broke off engaging the enemy and returned to Da Nang. Both Sandys were found to be so damaged they would take several days to repair.^[7]

The Bat 21 SAR began on the afternoon of April 2nd when an EB-66, call sign Bat 21 was flying just south of the DMZ. SA-2 batteries had recently been moved into South Vietnam and the extra jamming power of the EB-66s was required to protect USAF aircraft. Bat 21 was hit by an SA-2 missile at 24,000 feet. Lt Col Hambleton ejected from the aircraft and parachuted down near the Cam Lo River, about two miles northeast of the village of Cam Lo.

Hambleton used his survival radio to speak to an O-2 pilot who observed the bailout. The FAC called the Sandy flight that was orbiting feetwet off of Quang Tri. Within minutes the Skyraiders swept over Hambleton's position and blasted enemy troops who were closing in on him.

The first rescue attempt involved four US Army helicopters that were scrambled from Phu Bai. Two UH-1 troop transport helicopters from F Troop, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 196th Infantry Brigade were escorted towards Hambleton's location by a couple of AH-1G Cobras. As the helicopters approached Doug Ha the leading OH-1 and AH-1 were both hit by heavy ground fire. The Cobra limped away and made a forced landing on the coast from where the crew was rescued by an HH-53.

The 011-10 (67-17801 callsign Blueghost 39) caught fire and crashed a few miles northwest of Dong Ha. The door gunner, 5P4 J M Astorga, survived but was captured by the North Vietnamese but the rest of the crew, were killed.

Under a low ceiling of cloud on the 3rd two OV-10s pinpointed Hambleton's precise position by using LORAN navigational fixes. Once his location had been accurately plotted, Seventh Air Force put in up to 90 strike sorties a day for the next 10 days, many of them bombing through low cloud, in an attempt to keep the enemy away from Hambleton's position.

On the 6th another attempt to rescue Lt Col Hambleton and ILt Clark, who had been shot down on the 3rd, was made by a SAR task force under the direction of Sandy lead, Capt Fred Bob. The attempt ended in disaster when an HH - 53C call sign Jolly Green 67 of the 37th ARRS from Da Nang was shot down by ground fire as it approached Hambleton's position from the southwest. The helicopter crashed about half a mile south of ILt Clark's hiding place and three miles to the east of Cam Lo village.

The crew consisted of Capt Peter Hayden Chapman, Ili John Henry Call, TSgt Roy Drewitt Prater, TSgt Allen Jones Avery. Sgt William Roy Pearson and a photographer from the 601st Photo Flight, Sgt James Harold Alley.

