

Dramatic Rescue Of 2 Crewmen Cost 7 Lives



Lt. Col. Iceal E. Hambleton is given a glass of water after being found near Dong Ha, South Vietnam, by a rescue team. He had hidden for 11 days behind enemy lines. (AP)

Compiled From AP and UPI

SAIGON — The biggest U.S. air rescue effort of the war, including the use of B52 bombers, paved the way for an American-led commando team to snatch two downed crewmen from the middle of a North Vietnamese invasion force after nearly two weeks.

In disclosing the rescue Friday, U.S. sources said it cost the lives of seven other airmen shot down and took a personal order from Gen. Creighton Abrams, the American commander, to use the giant B52 bombers as a diversionary ploy.

Despite a broken arm, a sprained back, lack of food and water, and his 52 years, one of the crewmen, Lt. Col. Iceal Hambleton, managed to evade North Vietnamese troops swarming across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for 11 days. Sometimes they came within a few feet of his position.

Asked how he found the stamina to survive at his

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Pilot's Last Words: 'I'm Just a Decoy'

By STEWART KELLERMAN

QUANG TRI, Vietnam (UPI) — A downed U.S. Air Force pilot made his way through Communist-held jungle for 10 days, and on the 11th day, one helicopter after another sent to pick him up was shot down or damaged.

When last heard from, he radioed his would-be rescuers, "I'm just a decoy down here. Don't send any more planes. It's too dangerous."

Then he turned off his pocket-size radio transmitter or had it turned off for him. Military sources said Friday he was probably captured.

The sources declined to identify the pilot or say what plane he had been flying when he was shot down April 7 in the Communist-held portion of Quang Tri, South Vietnam's northernmost province.

North Vietnamese troops occupy the northern half of the province from the Demilitarized Zone down to the Cua Viet River. The Communists have moved heavy antiaircraft defenses into the region, including Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles and radar-guided 37mm guns.

The sources said the pilot hid out in the rough, jungled hills of northern Quang Tri Province for 11 days, working his way south to flatlands where he could be picked up by rescue choppers.

He lived on food from his green survival flight vest and

used the vest's tiny radio to notify U.S. officials early Tuesday when he had reached what he considered a good place for a pick-up.

U.S. and South Vietnamese choppers went in again and again to pick up the pilot, but were turned back by heavy ground fire. A big American AC130 Spectre gunship and Allied fighter-bombers covered the rescue aircraft from above.

One South Vietnamese sky-raider fighter-bomber, two government Huey utility choppers, one U.S. Jolly Green Giant helicopter and one or two American Pedro choppers were damaged or downed by the Communists, the military sources said.

A U.S. Army air cavalry helicopter team was on the way to the scene, however, when radio contact with the downed pilot was lost.

"It's possible that he's still free," the sources said. "But it's highly unlikely. It's almost certain he was captured when he lost contact."

CLOSURE: A Vietnam Story

By Mike Austin

On April 2, 1972, near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) of Vietnam, a U.S. Air Force forward air controller (FAC) pilot, using the call-sign "Bilk 34," broadcast an urgent radio plea over the emergency-only "Guard" frequency that was routinely monitored by all pilots flying in the Southeast Asian theater. The request was for assistance in rescuing any survivors of an EB-66 radar surveillance aircraft that was just shot down.

The plane had been struck by a surface-to-air missile fired by the North Vietnamese Army near Cam Lo. A general alert warning the possibility of further SAM attacks in that vicinity was also issued on guard, noting the time in minutes after the hour at the end of his message. A single chute had been observed to open, followed by a desperate call for help, so at least one survivor was confirmed.

Flying his model UH-1H Huey helicopter near Quang Tri to observe the three-day-old invasion by the NVA, Army Lieutenant Byron Kulland answered the call as "Blue Ghost 39," his official title while in the air. Byron was a short-timer "slick" pilot with F Troop, 8th (air) Cavalry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

Copilot Warrant Officer John Frink had only arrived in country a few weeks before but certainly understood the risk of such an impromptu rescue attempt in the midst of concentrated enemy forces. So did crew chief Specialist Ron Paschall and door gunner PFC Jose Astorga.

There had been little reconnaissance of the area since up to 45,000 NVA attacked March 30th from the west out of their sanctuaries in Laos and from across the Ben Hai River, only 12 miles north of them. This was nothing less than a desperate crusade by Hanoi to conquer the South once and for all, taking advantage of the American withdrawal that was nearly completed. As a general rule, only aviation units, along with a handful of Marine and Army ground advisors, were left to help the South Vietnamese military defend their country. By 1972, nearly all U.S. ground troops had gone home for good.

The situation changed almost hourly. No one was sure how far south or east the NVA had progressed. Certainly, they were in Cam Lo. To make matters worse, fighter jet air cover was unavailable from the Air Force. They would have to rely on a single Cobra helicopter gunship, or Snake, for protection on the quick snatch extraction.

It was also getting late, and the weather was closing in. Still, they decided to try anyway. After all, any one of them could be in similar straits at any time, given the uncertainty of the moment.

Without hesitation, Byron descended toward Ai Tu combat base (Quang Tri) to drop off the civilian news correspondent he had been hauling around. Then he departed northward at full power, heading toward the town of Dong Ha. Bilk would vector him to the survivor's last known position from there. Captain Mike Rosebeary followed closely behind in the Snake.

Kulland made a hard left turn and dropped to a scant fifty feet of altitude to hug the Cua Viet River as it twisted west from Dong Ha. The crew began to hunt for the airman evading the enemy somewhere below.

But immediately after crossing the river, ground fire raked both helicopters. Rosebeary's ship was shot up so badly, the emergency panel lit up like a Christmas tree. As senior officer, he wisely ordered a retreat and headed for the coast, losing his engine along the way. Luckily, a Jolly Green Giant search-and-rescue (SAR) chopper, sent up from Da Nang to assist in the rescue, was there in minutes to pick up the two-man crew unhurt.

Back on the lone Huey, Kulland had tried to turn and escape with Rosebeary; but his ship began trailing heavy smoke from fifty-one caliber hits on the engine. Astorga's M-60 machine gun jammed while attempting to suppress the fire. A round exploded against his chest protector or "chicken plate" as it was known at the time. Another shattered a leg, knocking him unconscious.

Then they crashed hard.

Astorga woke in a daze to find the crew chief Paschall pinned in the wreckage. Crawling to the front, he found the two pilots still strapped in their seats. Frink was conscious, but Kulland appeared to be dead.

Frink then threw two survival vests to Astorga and indicated they may have to leave the others behind if they couldn't get Paschall out quickly. Astorga helped Frink out of the aircraft then crawled away with the vests while Frink tried to get to Paschall. After dropping the vests a safe distance away, Astorga crawled back to the ship to try and help rescue Paschall.

Just then, the NVA rushed in firing madly at the ship. The Huey exploded, killing Frink and Paschall instantly. Weak from injury and loss of blood, the door gunner tried to crawl away again but was easily captured. He survived and was transported to Hanoi as one of America's last prisoners of war, coming home a few months later in the 1973 POW exchange.

That is how my friends and fellow soldiers met their fates on Easter Sunday 1972, while searching for a man known to them only as BAT 21.

More sadly, theirs was only the first in a series of catastrophic episodes, killing many more pilots and crew, before the largest rescue mission in the history of the United States Air Force ended successfully with a Navy SEAL floating BAT 21

down a river in darkness to freedom. Like others that would follow, Kulland's crew died doing the most noble thing warriors could be asked to do: risking their own lives so another might live.

In the long years since this tragedy occurred, seldom a day goes by that I do not think about it and draw some inspiration from the act. In large part, it was the memory of Blue Ghost 39's crew and that of six others we had to leave behind in a string of similar tragedies, that eventually drove me back to Vietnam.

On September 4, 1993, I held my wife, Lynn, for a long moment at the Philadelphia airport before departing alone on an odyssey into my past. We kissed and wished each other well. I thanked her again for being so insistent all these months that I stop talking about it and just go back to Nam to find whatever it was I was still looking for, if that were even possible.

Now the day had finally arrived, and I was nervous and relieved all at once to be getting underway. I dried her tears with my sleeve and walked to the gate, choking back tears of my own.

By the time my plane touched down on Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport thirty hours later, I was too strung out to care that a Russian MiG-23 was taxiing beside me, blowing the weeds low that grew through cracks in the poorly maintained runway with its hot exhaust.

Numbly, I passed through immigrations and customs to meet my guide...only he wasn't my real guide, he explained over a Heineken in the sultry bar. I would meet him when I flew up to Da Nang that afternoon. Wasn't I the one who sent the fax requesting to meet with former enemy soldiers? Yes, I had expressed an interest. Good, he said, because I would be glad to know my permanent guide was a former VC.

He smiled, waiting for my reaction. I had only asked to meet with them, not live with one for two weeks! Too tired to care, I boarded the aged Russian airliner for the short hop to central Vietnam...

No one was waiting at Da Nang.

I decided to hang around the terminal building in the sweltering heat and humidity that was everything I remembered and more. Even the brutal summer in New Jersey hadn't prepared me for this. I needed a cigarette, but there was a sign on the wall stating "For your health, please do not smoke in the building," which struck me as ironic coming from a nation that had been at war 40 years this century alone. So I walked out to a rock garden, with a pond full of goldfish in the middle, to have a smoke.

I stood watching a couple ancient MiG fighters doing touch-and-goes on the same parallel runways F-4 Phantoms once rocketed down as they headed for targets in I Corps, Laos, and North Vietnam. Many never returned. A red flag with yellow star

flapped on the pole where Old Glory once hung. Across the flight line, I could make out the name "Vikings" on a sagging hangar.

I was trying to sort all that out when an old NVA officer (all soldiers wear that uniform there today) walked out and stood a few feet away from me, pulling a cigarette from his pocket. We glanced at each other before turning our attention back to the MiGs.

I began to size him up out the corner of my eye. In his 60s, at least, he was almost certainly fighting when I was there in combat. The medals that hung from his chest were tarnished and old. "If my aim had been a little better back in '72, you might not be standing here now," I thought to myself, taking another drag.

Of course, that implied if his aim had been better...

Would I ever completely get over the war and stop the hating, I wondered? Certainly there was a difference between "getting over it" and "forgetting about it." I would never forget, nor would I ever apologize for fighting against communist aggression.

We watched until the last jet taxied off the active, never directly acknowledging the other's existence. At the same time, we started back toward the terminal. He reached the door first, then stood back holding it open for me. I smiled, he nodded, and we went our separate ways inside.

There, a man was scurrying around, obviously looking for someone. He spotted me easily, the only non-Asian in the place, and rushed over. "Are you Mister Michael Austin from the United States?" he asked.

When I replied in the affirmative, he began to apologize so profusely for being late that I was getting embarrassed. It was okay, I tried to reassure him. And stop being so damn formal. No big deal, okay?

He grabbed my heavy bags, including the seventy pound duffel full of gifts I was carrying on behalf of some Vietnamese friends in Camden to deliver to their relatives in Dong Ha. I stopped him and showed him how my new piggy-back suitcase was also a luggage cart, lifting the handle and strapping on the duffel and camera bag. He seemed to enjoy pulling the contraption behind him, while others staggered under the weight of their hand or shoulder carried items.

He looked a little too young to have fought in the war. Instead of the propaganda spewing former communist guerrilla I was expecting, Tru's demeanor was so disarming and exceedingly polite, I had to question him immediately about his past involvement in the war. To my relief, I found he was merely a child during the conflict. But he had been a communist soldier later, drafted out of college in 1979 to fight against the Chinese when they invaded Vietnam's northern provinces.

After 6 plus years in uniform, he returned to complete his degree in international business. He now hated the army and felt only slightly less loathing for government

policy but was nonetheless a model citizen I was sure. It was just the type of personality he had.

In the days ahead, my initial judgement prevailed and Tru proved to be a trusted friend as well as gracious host. Between him and my driver Tan, I was treated to an incredible journey back in time. Tan had once been a truck driver with the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) stationed on the same base at the same time as me at Marble Mountain, also known as China Beach. We hit it off almost immediately.

The trip to the Rocket Belt southeast of Da Nang the following day was electrifying, starting with Hill 55 and the Arizona Territory or "VC Holyland" as Tru called it. I dusted off an empty sandbag I found on Hill 55, apparently blown to rags by something big during the war. Tru took it and carefully placed it in the ruck he was carrying to save for me.

We walked out to the river bank and stood in open sunshine. It was a pleasant day and very quiet. Neither the drum of helicopter rotor blades, the throaty roar of deuce-and-a-half trucks, the thump of distant artillery and bombs, nor the short, vicious cracks of M-16s or AK-47s could be heard anymore. Only birds singing, children playing, and a dog barking once in a while from the nearby village.

Directly in front of me stood the old Liberty Bridge that once connected An Hoa combat base to the outside world across the Song Thu Bon River. Built in 1967, the vital link was defended fiercely, first by Marine and later Army units stationed in the AO. A particularly savage battle happened in March 1969, when a full battalion of NVA overran the Marines. Ultimately, they had to request artillery fire from Hill 55 into their own compound to beat back the assault.

Now unimportant to anyone, the bridge stood derelict, just a bunch of river pilings holding up so much war decay, waiting to collapse under the weight of time. Whole sections of road surface were missing, as well as the guard railings, cannibalized by the locals for building materials, I supposed. A sturdy hooch was probably better than a bridge, in peace time, anyway. So long as they put it to good use, I didn't care one way or another. A floating bridge was now used a few kilometers upstream, Tru said. He seemed puzzled by my intense interest in the pathetic wood skeleton.

Looking around, I spotted the place I had been ambushed two times in two months while flying a Huey gunship on a night reconnaissance mission dubbed Nighthawk. It was only a couple miles away, just this side of the horseshoe bend in the river, where two dry stream beds met forming an oval. The sight gave me a slight chill even on this warm afternoon.

Nighthawk had been a formidable weapon indeed, designed exclusively for close combat fire support at night. On one occasion, we had to place our fire within thirty feet of a squad of U.S. soldiers under attack in order to save them from being overrun. And it worked beautifully. Crewed by two pilots and four gunners, it boasted a fifty-caliber machine gun, two M-60's (one of the M-60 gunners also doubled as the "light man"), and the main weapon, a minigun capable of firing

4,000 bullets each minute, 67 a second.

The VC quickly learned how we flew the mission...low and slow at maybe two hundred feet above the ground at fifty knots, while shining a multi-million candle power xenon search light around. So they devised an ambush scheme using a small campfire as the bait each time, understanding we would be compelled to fly over for a closer look at such a late hour. We were both a force to be feared and an irresistible target to them at the same time.

After lighting the fire, eight or ten of them would then set up in a ring approximately two hundred meters wide and wait for the chopper to circle overhead, spotlight ablaze. Then they'd open up with rocket propelled grenades (RPG) first, hoping to finish us off then and there. Fortunately, the grenades always missed us, but their explosions on the ground became the signal for them to open up with withering automatic weapons fire.

For us, it meant extinguishing the light and returning fire as we escaped the immediate area. Specialist Jose Garcia, a second-tour gunner from San Antonio, quickly hosed the rings down with minigun each time, effectively silencing their guns in a minute or less. But a minute is still a very long time in the heat of a firefight, and we took multiple hits.

From the vantage point of the recovery or "chase" aircraft always circling at a safe altitude above us, the strings of multi-colored tracers flying up to a point resembled a Christmas tree; so that's what it was called, a Christmas Tree Ambush. Our search light became the top ornament on the tree.

The Que Son Mountains loomed to the south. Staring through binoculars at the jagged skyline that was still imprinted on my mind twenty-one years later, I remembered all the hunter-killer missions our air-cav teams used to fly out there, telling Tru a few war stories in the process. He seemed fascinated hearing them, asking lots of questions. This time, he was speaking as a former soldier himself.

I told him that, at one time or another, I had covered its entire length, all the way from the terminus near the coast, right up to the Laotian border where things really got interesting. The mountains were used heavily as a tentacle of the Ho Chi Minh Trail by the NVA to infiltrate the An Hoa basin below Da Nang. Our scouts usually found something worthwhile to shoot at, or were shot at themselves, just about every time we went into the Que Sons.

"I must have fired a zillion rockets in those hills," I told Tru, shaking my head in amazement to see it again.

I had also experienced my first B-52 Arc Light up close there. We were sitting on the helipad at LZ Baldy, waiting to pull a bomb damage assessment (BDA) for the Air Force as soon as the strike ended. The side of the mountains rippled with powerful explosions, shaking the very ground below our feet. It was awesome. Like the biggest Fourth of July celebration one could imagine, with God playing kettle drums

in the background for effect. But we didn't find anything that day except smoking craters ringed by pulverized flora and fauna. As the saying went, B-52s didn't leave bodies. Only tiny pieces of bodies.

A short distance west, smack in the middle of the river, lay Football Island. Its name was given by the Marines for its distinctive "pig skin" shape. However, seeing it again invoked painful memories of a search and destroy mission that went awry there one day. When it ended, three people lay dead, two by my hand, after the Vietnamese ground commander radioed us to shoot them. A quick burst of minigun and they were gone or "greased" as we used to say.

The ones I shot both turned out to be women. The ARVN ground troops reported finding VC identification papers on them, but I never saw anything to substantiate the claim. And they were carrying no weapons. I still believe they could have been just frightened farmers fleeing the ground troops as they progressed through the village, giving it the Zippo treatment by setting all the hooches on fire.

The third, a man swimming across the river, was shot point blank by a scout hovering overhead after the ground commander refused our offer to capture him alive for interrogation. Again, no weapons were found.

I could almost see him floating past this bridge again. He was face down, arms outstretched, enveloped by a visible tear drop stain of blood pointed downstream as the slow current carried him on the solitary journey to the South China Sea.

I've often blamed the ground commander for his harsh judgement, but that's just the way it goes sometimes in war. Men can make mistakes. Of all the people I killed, these were the only question marks, I told Tru. He nodded like he understood, and we turned back for the car.

One of the roughest parts of the trip emotionally, however, came later, when I visited My Lai (properly called Son My), site of the infamous massacre.

I knew all too well what happened there in March 1968 and originally told Tru I had no desire to visit the place. Besides, there was still so much to see in my old area of operations before we traveled north to Hue. But, at his uncharacteristic urging, I agreed to go at the last moment, under protest, as an excuse to see the Chu Lai area again.

Once there, however, I was taken by the somber beauty of the memorial. And enraged at the thought we were even capable of such an act. "We expected that from the VC, but that's not how Americans were trained to fight," I told Tru, venting a rage and shame that had been festering twenty-five long years. Again, he offered a sympathetic shrug.

Next day, we traveled north to Hue. I was surprised how the Citadel still bore the scars of Tet 1968. In fact, I almost expected to see a flak-jacketed Marine or sandal-clad Viet Cong jump from the dark recesses of a blown out building. Time had stood still in Vietnam, preserving one of the greatest battles of the war. Tru described the

enemy's month-long occupation of the city, when thousands of Hue citizens were executed by the North Vietnamese for suspicion of being collaborators with the Saigon regime.

"They were shot, hung, hacked to death, burned or buried alive. Some were weighted down with stones and drowned in the river."

As at My Lai, we were both appalled at the inhumanity, regardless of who was responsible.

Technically a communist and my former enemy, Tru was also one of the most decent and understanding men I could hope to meet. That evening, we sat quietly at the edge of the Perfume River in Hue, sipping beer as we watched the sun set on the western mountains. Tru joined me in a toast to the six Blue Ghosts, all from the scout platoon, who were killed there June 11 and 12, 1972.

I'd always considered scouts among the bravest men I ever knew, and these were the essence of that breed. They perished in three separate crashes, some while trying to save others or just to retrieve the dead. That was all important back then, bringing home the dead. This time we failed, though, and had to leave them all behind.

The memories stung like before as I mentally went through the list of names: Arnold "Dusty" Holm, Jim McQuade, James Hackett, Wayne Bibbs, Robin Yeakley, and Richard Wiley. I've often touched their names on the Wall in Washington, remembering each in turn.

I was flying about two hundred feet away alongside Wiley's chopper, piloted by Warrant Officer Tom Martin, when an anti-aircraft round slammed into the rear of their ship just below the exhaust pipe. I could see the flash of it, then Wiley leaning outside the door returning fire with his M-60, as he simultaneously strained to see how much damage there was to his aircraft. Suddenly, the engine quit; and they crashed into the tree tops, flipping over and catching on fire.

Setting up a "daisy chain" pattern with two other gunships to lay down continuous fire, I emptied every rocket, grenade, cannon shell, and machine gun bullet my Cobra carried (which was considerable) at the large NVA force we had inadvertently overflowed while crossing a ridge line near the Song Bo River. Some were running openly across a large meadow, trying to get to the tree line for cover. For every one that made it, two or three were struck down in the rain of steel and lead and high explosives. Just a hundred meters below them was Martin's burning ship.

Trying to buy more time for any survivors to escape, I started making dry runs on the ridge to keep the daisy chain unbroken until the other gunships were expended, too. I hoped my diving Cobra would keep their heads down awhile longer, that they wouldn't figure out I was out of ammo and bluffing.

It seemed to work. At least they weren't visibly moving or returning fire. We

continued until low fuel forced us to return to Camp Eagle, but I never saw anyone climb out of the wreckage. Then as we turned to leave, the ship exploded. I was sick.

Imagine my joy later that day when I heard that at least one had made it out! Tom Martin was rescued by an Air Force SAR helicopter, again a Jolly Green, badly injured and burned, but very much alive. Miraculously, he had managed to escape his would be captors, moving a few klicks (kilometers) away from the crash before using his signal mirror to alert the Jolly Green's crew. He had been a grunt during his first tour and was probably saved by his jungle savvy.

Wiley had been pinned under the wreck, he told rescuers. Adrenalin pumping, he had tried to pry the Hughes OH-6 light observation helicopter (LOH) off his gunner with a tree branch, but the limb broke. As he turned around to find another branch, the ship exploded killing Wiley instantly. He said he wasn't able to contact us because his survival radio had melted in the fire before he regained consciousness after the crash knocked him out.

He watched us fly away.

"We tried so damn hard to get you guys out, but you know how it was! The NVA simply overwhelmed us all in the invasion," I wanted to shout at their bones, defending the survivor guilt I still carried.

All except Tommy were still lying out there somewhere, just like Three-Nine's crew up near the DMZ.

The next two days were full up with visits to such war icons as Camp Carroll, Ai Tu combat base, and Khe Sanh. Walking around the small citadel of Quang Tri City, I thought about the last time I had seen it, July 1972, shattered and broken to rubble that was still smoking from an artillery and bomb strike as we arrived with a hundred slicks carrying elements of the ARVN Airborne Division and South Vietnamese Marines.

The NVA were holding this very position, the heart of the city. I flew with the lead aircraft to "prep" the landing zone (LZ) with rocket fire and cover the insertion. Inbound on the first rocket run, I remembered being scared shitless but was sure I had plenty of company that day.

Two U.S. Marine choppers, assisting from the Seventh Fleet, were shot down and more lives lost. Then an errant bomb fell on members of the Airborne Division, killing scores and blunting the attack to retake Quang Tri. It had been my last mission in Vietnam, before returning to the Land of the Big PX, and it had been for naught. The survivors were later extracted, and it would not be until September that the city was finally back in friendly hands.

A recently erected memorial stood at the center of the citadel. I walked over and

scooped a hand full of dirt from the small garden surrounding it. Ever resourceful, Tru presented a plastic bag and began to dig more soil, placing it inside for safekeeping. I wanted to bring a piece of the country we had fought so hard to save, home with me. The little bag quickly filled with some of the most expensive real estate in the world, in terms of human suffering and sacrifice.

At Carroll, only a stone monument marked the once great artillery base. I was surprised to see a couple dozen men emerge out of the jungle shortly after arriving. They were dressed in filthy rags and carrying picks and shovels, the tools of the present day scrap-metal hunters. Tru explained they were selling U.S. dog tags, which they claimed to have found in the outlying country side.

I thumbed through the crusted metal plates but was too uncomfortable to pull out my wallet since I was probably carrying ten years wages for the average Vietnamese at the time. At my urging, we departed for Khe Sanh, leaving them disappointed and me curious as to the identities on those tags.

Stepping around live ordnance that still littered the ground a quarter century later, I felt genuine fear in Vietnam once again at Khe Sanh. Tru hurriedly grabbed some loose shrubbery to cover a pile of rusting grenades lying in a shallow hole as children approached us from the nearby village. Then we quickly walked away so not to draw their curiosity to the deadly explosives.

What a way to have to grow up, I lamented. Tru agreed, explaining as many as 10,000 civilians had been killed by land mines and other explosives left over from the war by both sides. Countless others were maimed, including many children. The legacy of Vietnam continued.

Instead of the blond sand found at Quang Tri which was situated close to the coast, the dirt up here in the mountains was colored a deep red due to its high iron content. We didn't even have to dirty our hands to collect it. The recent rains had left a slick, sticky coating that stuck so hard to my shoes, I was two inches taller when we got back to the car. I had to use my trusty Buck pocket knife to peel it away.

After a claustrophobic tour of an underground tunnel network used by the enemy at Vinh Moc and my first trip across the Ben Hai River into what was North Vietnam, I returned to Dong Ha, checking into what passed as its only hotel. The ugly Russian-built concrete structure was filthy, with bugs and lizards crawling everywhere; but I took it in stride. It still far outshone any of the hooches I lived in during my tour of duty.

Thoughtfully, Tru had arranged for a room that overlooked the plains where Kulland, Frink, and Paschall were shot down. Standing on the small balcony, I adjusted the worn MIA bracelet with Kulland's name on it that fellow gun pilot Chuck LaCelle had sent me to wear on the occasion of my return. Chuck and gun platoon leader Tim Sprouse had both nearly been killed trying to rescue them, along with their copilots, Lieutenant Skip Baebler and Warrant Officer Neil Thompson. It was Chuck's way of remembering.

Returning to the modest lobby, I was surprised to see two, 4-wheel drive vehicles pull up in front of the hotel and a dozen or so young American men climb out. They were dressed casually in colorful, loose-fitting civilian pants and tee shirts. Some had bandannas tied around their foreheads to keep sweat out of their eyes.

As they unpacked rucksacks and boxes of supplies, I walked out to introduce myself. To my amazement, I found they were members of the Joint Task Force - Full Accounting teams (JTF-FA in militarise or JTF for short). Part soldiers, part archeologists, they were sent here to resolve the fates of our MIAs. I was elated just to shake their hands. Naturally, I asked if we could meet later at the small hotel bar to talk.

"Right after we get cleaned up," replied one. "It was a long, hot hump out to the dig today."

Later, I found myself in the company of exceptional men, each hand picked for his assignment. They came from all branches of the military, possessing a variety of critical skills. A medic, ordnance expert, two linguists, and a few infantry types, among others.

Conversing over some Ba Ba's, or the popular Vietnamese-brewed beer "333," I found myself thinking back to joyous times spent with similar men twenty-two years before. I asked about their work. Not surprising, it was sometimes frustrating, sometimes rewarding, they all agreed; but they were dedicated to the cause in any event.

With all that unexploded ordnance lying around, their job was certainly not without risk, I observed, cringing to think one of them could be hurt while searching for the bones of long dead Americans. This prompted a short but spirited discussion among them on how to divide their limited resources the following day.

"Okay, if your team gets the medic, then we get EOD," one said firmly, ending the friendly argument.

Their tales of painstaking investigation and back breaking work to resolve the mysteries surrounding our missing-in-action were captivating. Because of their professionalism and national sensitivity to the POW/MIA issue, they were careful not to reveal actual names or locations of unresolved cases when telling the stories. But that in no way detracted from the incredible narrations I was hearing.

Inevitably, the discussion turned to the war. Giving them a flavor for local history after the invasion of 1972 (the hotel would have been behind enemy lines by day three), I looked toward the open window that faced north and mentioned I had lost a crew of men somewhere out there, "probably within a mile or two of this hotel."

When one of them asked their names, I retold the story of Blue Ghost 39's ill-fated rescue attempt. Navy petty officer, Adam Burgess, said it rung a bell. He would check it out on the computer in his room, linked to the main archives in Hanoi, and

let me know what happened to my friends. I couldn't believe what I was hearing!

Adam returned fifteen minutes later and approached Jeff Newman, the other Navy linguist. They talked in private a bit, then shook their heads as if in agreement.

"Are you in contact with any of the families?" Adam asked.

"No," I answered honestly, assuring them I was merely a fellow vet interested in knowing what happened to them. Jeff Newman sat his glass down and allowed that he had personally excavated Blue Ghost 39's crash site in April. They were now in the lab in Hawaii awaiting identification.

"Nothing's positive; but if you're asking my personal opinion, I feel I've accounted for all three of them. That's all I can say at this point. I wouldn't have told you that much, except you're a friend of theirs and all."

I was speechless for a moment, looking at this strapping young sailor who had gleaned their precious earthly remains from the sandy soil. "Where did you find them?" I was finally able to ask.

Jeff stood and walked to the window. "See that ville just across the river? Right next to it."

I stood motionless, trying to sort through the flood of emotions I was feeling. Tru leaned close to me. "They are no longer missing. Maybe you should make the bracelet a gift," he almost whispered.

Tru's suggestion moved me. How appropriate. Removing the silver band inscribed with Kulland's name, rank, and date he became MIA from my wrist, I handed it to Jeff, asking him to accept it from the crew's families and friends as a token of our deepest gratitude. Back at the table, I ordered another round for everybody.

"Now, I'd like to tell you about the personalities behind those bones you found..."

Clouds grayed the morning sky, threatening rain on April 29, 1994, as Lynn and I gripped one another's hands and walked the last hundred yards toward the old chapel at Ft. Myer, next to Arlington National Cemetery in Washington. Others who remembered and could attend converged on the small sanctuary as well.

It was one pleasant surprise after another. Al Rushatz, the former Blue Ghost commander, showed up first. Later came Frank Leggio, our chief maintenance pilot, who had roomed with Kulland just before he was shot down. Tim Sprouse and Chuck LaCelle were also present and accounted for. Another surprise visitor was Darrel Whitcomb, one of the Air Force FAC pilots circling overhead in an OV-10 Bronco reconnaissance plane when they died.

We met with the families briefly before entering through separate doors. Inside, we sang hymns and bowed through the moving eulogy. Outside, a team of six white

stallions paced nervously as the metal casket was loaded onto the caisson. The line of mourners followed the horses through the cemetery down Grant Avenue.

Eight soldiers carefully lifted the casket to follow Chaplain Pierce through neat rows of white monuments, down to the final resting place of Blue Ghost 39's crew. It was a heroes' burial. The 21-gun salute. The bugler standing alone under a shade tree while playing Taps, the loneliest song ever written. The chaplain presenting three, crisply-folded flags, one to each family. After the services concluded, a soldier stood ramrod straight, charged with guarding the men until they were lowered into U.S. soil finally and forever. As the others dispersed to rendezvous at the monument's reception center for a final gathering, I stayed behind, lingering alone awhile to remember them one last time and thank them for their ultimate sacrifice.

After the reception, those who could attend were invited to go the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. At the Wall, three soldiers from Ft. Hood, Texas, who had escorted the remains from California, held a short ceremony in the crews' honor. Lieutenants Perito and Hoyt joined with Sergeant Jackson to place a plaque from the men of 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry below the familiar names on the monument.

Then, they stood at attention and saluted the polished black granite. I swelled with pride at the sight of these men honoring their cavalry forbears. Perito, who lead the delegation, was handed John Frink's MIA bracelet by Chuck. Now representatives of all the men responsible for bringing them home had been duly thanked, both here and in Vietnam.

As I left the nation's capital for the drive home, I felt a contentment I hadn't known before I came. I was sure the others were feeling it, too. If a piece of us had been left behind in Vietnam, a piece of us had surely come home with these brave souls.

Author's notes:

- Special thanks to Nail FAC pilot Darrel Whitcomb (Col. USAF retired), and various members of F Troop who were there when it happened, for providing details about Blue Ghost 39's final mission.

- Kulland's fatal crash is not acknowledged at all in the movie about BAT 21 (starring Danny Glover) made famous a few years back. And, sadly, it is only alluded to briefly in the book by the same name, added as a vague footnote buried somewhere in the appendix. It's a pity they chose to ignore it. Whitcomb agrees and is currently researching and writing a historically, accurate account of the rescue, the way it really happened. I wish him luck and godspeed.

UPDATE -- 1998!

- Darrel Whitcomb's book is published: "The Rescue of BAT21," Naval Institute Press, ISBN 1-55750-946-8. I started reading it last week and was immediately impressed by his extensive research and writing style. Flying as an Air Force FAC pilot, Darrel is also a top-shelf historian from the period.

From "The Northwest Veterans" Web Site:

Book Review: The Rescue of BAT 21

- "Marines Under The Gun At Liberty Bridge" ("Vietnam" magazine, Oct. 1995).
- Finally, my everlasting thanks and love go out to Avery D'Beq, John Frink's sister, for all she's gone through since the War and for bringing us all together again at Arlington. My best regards to all the families of our missing in action.

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 **Return to Mike Austin's Gallery off "Remembrance"**

 **Return to the "Visitor's Reports" Gallery off "Visit"**

Robert LaPointe

From:
Sent: Sunday, April 03, 2005 4:44 AM
To:

Subject: Today in SEA History, Easter Sunday, 2 April 1972



Today in SEA History

Easter Sunday, 2 April 1972

Bat 21 Bravo is shutdown north of the Cam Lo bridge.

Bat 21 Bravo was the call sign of Lt Col Iceal "Gene" Hambleton, an EB-66C navigator, who was flying an electronic path-finder mission, escorting a B-52D three-ship cell (call sign "Copper") attacking massed NVA armor northwest of the abandoned ARVN base at Fire Base Fuller and Camp Carol in Military Region One (MR I). Hambleton's EB-66C, s.n. 54-0466, 42nd TEWS, Korat RTAFB had been shutdown by a North Vietnamese SA-2 missile and crashed south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in the area of Cam Lo (N16.50 - E107.01) on the north side of the Mieu Giang River.

An O-2A Skymaster pilot, 1st Lt Bill Jankowski (call sign Bilk 34) 20th TASS, Da Nang AB, RV was an eyewitness to the shutdown. By circumstances and fate, Jankowski became the first (in a series of) "On Scene Commanders" during the search-and-rescue (SAR) effort for BAT 21B.

Nearby, another SAR force consisting of a Lockheed HC-130P command-and-control aircraft (call sign King 22), Sikorsky HH-53Cs (call sign Jolly Green 65 & 67) long-range rescue helicopters, and a force of 10 Douglas A-1 Skyraiders (call sign Sandy) were orbiting east of Quang Tri alerted to support the SAR for another O-2A FAC, call sign Mike 81. The Sandy flight lead was a Capt Don Morse (Tango Mike). Fate would also have Morse become the next On Scene Commander for the initial few days of the BAT 21B SAR effort.

US Army helicopters Blueghost 28 (Huey) and Blueghost 39 (Cobra) assigned to F Troop of the 8th Cavalry @ Hue Phu Bai AAF, proceeded into the battle area at low altitude and high speed to attempt a



Servicemen's remains return home

Released: Oct 3, 1997

WASHINGTON (AFNS) -- The remains of seven American servicemen previously unaccounted for from Southeast Asia have been identified and were returned to their families for burial in the United States.

They are identified as Capt. Peter H. Chapman, Centerburg, Ohio; 1st Lt. John H. Call III, Potomac, Md.; Tech. Sgt. Allen J. Avery, Auburn, Mass.; Tech. Sgt. Roy D. Prater, Tiffin, Ohio; and Sgt. William R. Pearson, Webster, N.H., all Air Force personnel. The names of one airman and one Army aviator will not be released at the request of their families.

On April 6, 1972, Chapman, Call, Avery, Prater, and Pearson were flying an H-53C Super Jolly helicopter on a search-and-rescue mission over Quang Tri, South Vietnam. While trying to evade enemy ground fire, Chapman, the pilot, flew the helicopter to an altitude of 200 feet. The helicopter then crashed into the ground and burst into flames. Other aircraft in the area did not see anyone exit the aircraft before impact.

In 1989, 1992 and 1994, joint U.S.-Vietnamese teams investigated and excavated a crash site in Quang Tri Province. During the 1992 investigation of this incident, a local villager reported finding remains and burying them in his garden. U.S. investigators excavated the garden and recovered possible human remains.

In 1994, a joint team found many bone fragments, personal effects and aircraft wreckage. The remains were repatriated to the United States. Mitochondrial DNA testing was used to confirm the identifications.

With the identification of these seven servicemen, 2,109 Americans remain unaccounted-for from the Vietnam War.

"The U.S. government welcomes and appreciates the cooperation of the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam which resulted in the accounting of these servicemen," said a Defense Department spokesman. "We hope that such cooperation will bring increased results in the future. Achieving the fullest possible accounting for these Americans is of the highest national priority."

The Flight of Jolly Green 67

Jolly Green 67 was an HH-53 long range rescue helicopter assigned to the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) at Da Nang Airbase, South Vietnam. It was downed by enemy ground fire on 6 April, 1972, while attempting to rescue two American airmen who had been shot down and were hiding behind enemy lines.

This was one of the key events in what would become the largest rescue operation of that war, the rescue of Bat 21. Bat 21 was an EB-66 electronic jamming and reconnaissance aircraft. On 2 April, it was hit and destroyed by a North Vietnamese surface to air missile as it and another EB-66, Bat 22, escorted three B-52s as they bombed advancing North Vietnamese units invading South Vietnam at the beginning of what has come to be known as the *Easter Offensive* .

Only one crewmember, Lt Col Iccal Gene Hambleton was able to eject from his stricken aircraft. His personal call sign for the rescue operation was Bat 21 Bravo. Immediately, US Army helicopters tried to rescue Lt Col Hambleton. But the North Vietnamese guns drove them off and downed one - a UH1 Huey , call sign Blueghost 39. Three of its crewmembers were killed and one was captured. The captured soldier was released by the North Vietnamese a year later. The bodies of the other three were eventually recovered and buried in Arlington National cemetery in April, 1994.

The next day, Jolly Greens from the 37th ARRS made two attempts to pick up Bat 21 Bravo. Both times, they were driven off with heavy damage to their aircraft. Additionally, an OV-10, call sign Nail 38, was hit and downed by an enemy missile. Its pilot Capt Bill Henderson, was captured. Its navigator, 1Lt Mark Clark, call sign Nail 38 Bravo, was able to hide and await rescue like Lt Col Hambleton.

For two more days, rescue forces fought the weather and the enemy forces to try to rescue the two airmen. They could not get in. Instead, hundreds of airstrikes were put in to beat down the enemy gunners.

But the 6th of April, dawned bright and clear. So, after 42 more airstrikes were put in, a rescue force of four HH-53s and six escorting A-1 *Sandy* aircraft launched to make another attempt to recover the two evading Americans. They were assisted by several forward air controllers in O-2s and OV-10s and numerous other support aircraft.

Jolly Green 67 was designated to make the rescue attempt. But as it came to a hover over Bat 21 Bravo, it was raked by heavy enemy fire. The escorting *Sandy* A-1s tried to engage the enemy guns. But they could not get them all.

And they could see what the ground fire was doing to the helicopter. So several shouted for the crew to fly out of the area. The crew of Jolly Green 67 aborted the rescue attempt and tried to maneuver their stricken aircraft to safety. But the enemy fire continued and so

damaged the craft that it crashed in a huge fireball a few kilometers south of the survivors. The fire was intense and lasted several days. There were never any indications of survivors.

The Sandy pilots were shocked by the turn of events. The other helicopters were ready to move into the area and make another attempt. But Sandy 01, the leader of the taskforce was not willing to risk another aircraft. He aborted the mission. It was just too dangerous.

The next day, another OV-10 supporting the rescue, call sign Covey 282, was shot down in the same area. The pilot, 1Lt Bruce Walker, call sign Covey 282 Alpha, was on the ground and evading like the two earlier airmen. His crewman, US Marine 1Lt Larry Potts, was never heard from. With this news, General Abrams, the overall US commander in Saigon directed that there would be no more helicopter rescue efforts for the now three downed flyers. Instead, a ground team was formed to attempt to infiltrate through enemy lines and pick them up. It was planned and directed by US Marine Lt Col Andy Anderson, and lead by US Navy SEAL LT Tom Norris. From 10 through 12 April, the team operated through enemy lines and rescued 1Lt Clark and Lt Col Hambleton. They also intended to rescue 1Lt Walker. But on the 18th, he was discovered by Viet Cong troops and killed. The rescues were over. Later, Lt Tom Norris would get the Medal of Honor for the mission.

This was the largest sustained rescue operation of the war. Over 800 airstrikes, to include B-52s, were put in in direct support. Numerous helicopters, A-1s and forward air controller aircraft were shot down or damaged. A total of eleven men were killed. But it was all done in the best traditions of the rescue forces. Their motto was: *That Others May Live*. During the war, they rescued 3,883 downed American or allied airmen, sailors, marines and soldiers and made it possible for them to return home.

And finally, we welcome you home, Jolly Green, and salute you proudly for a job well done.

Darrel Whitecomb

Author - The Rescue of Bat 21

To be published, Spring, 1998 by the Naval Institute Press.



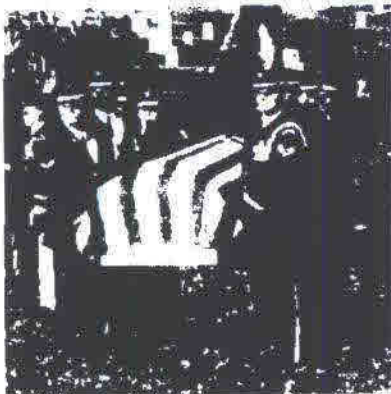


Air Force News

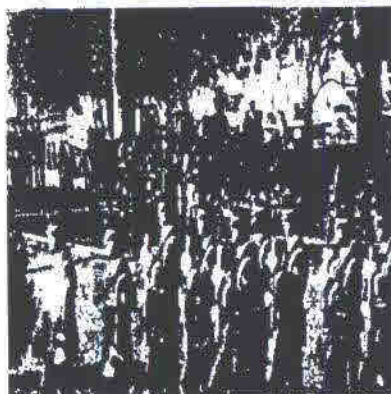
News Service

Arlington funeral honors crew of Jolly Green 67

Released: Nov 20, 1997



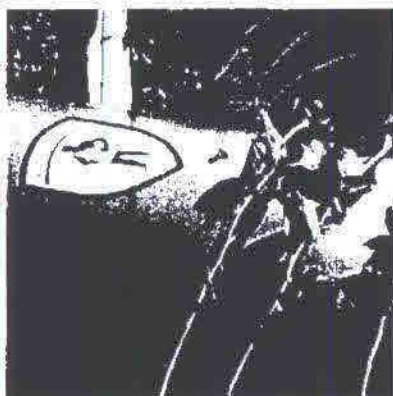
Members of the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard carry the remains of one of six U.S. Air Force servicemen to his final resting place at Arlington National Cemetery. The six airmen, part of the famed Bat-21 rescue attempt in South Vietnam, were buried in the cemetery Nov. 19. Twenty-five years ago, the airmen were performing a search-and-rescue mission over Quang Tri, when their Sikorsky HH-53 Helicopter -- call sign Jolly Green 67 -- was hit by enemy fire and crashed. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Angela Stafford)



The repatriated remains of six airmen who were part of the famed Bat-21 rescue attempt in South Vietnam, were buried Nov. 19 in Arlington National Cemetery. Capts. John H. Call III and Peter H. Chapman II, Tech. Sgts. James H. Alley, Allen J. Avery and Roy D. Prater, and Sgt. William R. Pearson were performing a search-and-rescue mission April 6, 1972, over Quang Tri, South Vietnam, when their Sikorsky HH-53 Helicopter -- call sign Jolly Green 67 -- was hit by enemy fire and crashed. The crew of Jolly Green 67 was part of an ultimately successful effort to rescue downed airmen Lt. Col. Iccal Hambleton and 1st Lt. Mark Clark. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Angela Stafford)



Assistant Vice Chief of Staff Lt. Gen David L. Vesely, presents a flag to Greta Call, the mother of Capt. John H. Call III. Captain Call and five other airman lost their lives while flying in support of the famed Bat-21 rescue attempt in South Vietnam. The airman were buried Nov. 19 in Arlington National Cemetery. The six airmen were performing a search-and-rescue mission April 6, 1972, over Quang Tri, when their Sikorsky HH-53 Helicopter -- call sign -- Jolly Green 67 -- was hit by enemy fire and crashed. The crew of Jolly Green 67 was part of an ultimately successful effort to rescue downed airmen Lt. Col. Iceal Hambleton and 1st Lt. Mark Clark. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Angela Stafford)



A pararescueman placed this Jolly Green sticker on the casket of one of the repatriated remains of the Jolly Green 67 crew that went down in the famed Bat-21 rescue attempt. The airmen were buried Nov. 19 in Arlington National Cemetery. Capts. John H. Call III and Peter H. Chapman II, Tech. Sgts. James H. Alley, Allen J. Avery and Roy D. Prater, and Sgt. William R. Pearson were performing a search-and-rescue mission April 6, 1972, over Quang Tri, when their Sikorsky HH-53 Helicopter -- call sign Jolly Green 67 -- was hit by enemy fire and crashed. The crew of Jolly Green 67 was part of an ultimately successful effort to rescue downed airmen Lt. Col. Iceal Hambleton and 1st Lt. Mark Clark. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Angela Stafford)

*by Staff Sgt. Michael Dorsey
Air Force News Service*

ARLINGTON, Va. -- Twenty-five years after the longest search-and-rescue mission in Air Force history, two pararescuemen, a mechanic, photographer, pilot and co-pilot, were remembered Nov. 19 for giving their lives trying to save others.

Six crewmen from Jolly Green 67, Capts. John Call III and Peter Chapman II, Tech. Sgts. Allen J.