

A-6A 155652 VMA(AW)-224, USMC, USS *Coral Sea*
Major Clyde D Smith (survived)
1Lt Scott Douglas Ketchie (KIA)

Along with the Navy squadrons on board the *Coral Sea* when she deployed for her sixth combat cruise to Southeast Asia was a Marine Corps A-6 Intruder squadron, VMA(AW)-224. This was the only occasion during the entire war that a Marine Corps A-6 squadron operated from an aircraft carrier and VMA(AW)-224 flew interdiction missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail at night and attack missions against North Vietnam by day.

Major Smith was flying a road interdiction mission at dusk over the Trail in southern Laos when he spotted a small group of trucks near Ban Bamran just across the border from the DMZ. As he was about to leave the target area following his third pass over the trucks Maj Smith felt a thump and the aircraft started to shake having been hit by AAA. The crew could see the reflection of a fire from the rear of the aircraft and within a few seconds the controls froze and the aircraft pitched up into an inverted spin. Maj Smith ejected and thought his NFO had also left the aircraft although no trace was ever found of 1Lt Ketchie. The aircraft was at 12,000 feet when Maj Smith ejected and, although the light was fading, he was clearly visible in his parachute as he came floating down towards the jungle and landed close to the aircraft's wreckage. The North Vietnamese threw a cordon around the downed pilot and set a trap to shoot down the SAR helicopter, which they knew would soon arrive.

The SAR effort to rescue the crew of Bengal 505 became one of the most intensive and best known of the war. A USAF HH-53C was already in the area when the Intruder was shot down but was not allowed to attempt a rescue because there were no escorts available at the time. Later a Pave Nail OV-10A from the 23rd TASS entered the area and monitored the pilot's location and enemy movement using its night vision equipment. Maj Smith remained hidden during the night and for the following three days and nights as rescue attempts were made and foiled by a combination of bad weather and enemy activity. Unfortunately, he was in a bad position for an attempted rescue and the SAR commander had to be careful not to give Smith's position away. Despite a coded attempt to get Maj Smith to move out of the area he remained in his position and the North Vietnamese were showing signs of impatience. On the fourth day (13 April) the SAR forces decided that they could wait no longer and started a brilliantly coordinated and executed rescue under the on-scene commander, Maj James C Harding of the 1st SOS. Skyhawks from VA-55 attacked SAM sites nearby using Shrike missiles as other Navy aircraft, under control of an OV-10 FAC, swept in low to bomb and strafe North Vietnamese troops surrounding Maj Smith. An HH-53C, 69-5793 from the 40th ARRS flown by Capt Bennie D Orrell and Lt James R Casey, swooped down under the low cloud and spotted Maj Smith. He hooked himself to the jungle penetrator and was hoisted up by the PJ as NVA soldiers fired on the helicopter and the survivor. Clyde Smith had been on the ground in one of the most heavily defended areas of Laos for four days and his rescue was an outstanding example of the work of the SAR forces in Southeast Asia. Capt Orrell was awarded the AFC for this mission. Maj Smith flew a further 32 missions from the *Coral Sea* including the mining of Haiphong Harbour on 9 May. He later commanded two Marine Corps squadrons at MCAS Cherry Point before retiring in 1979.