

Bat 21 Summary fm Hobson book p. 220

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EB-66C 54-0466 42 TEWS, 388 TFW, USAF, Korat

Maj Wayne Louis Bolte (KIA)

Lt Col Iceal E Hambleton (survived)

Lt Col Anthony Robert Giannangeli (KIA)

Lt Col Charles Allen Levis (KIA)

Maj Henry Muir Serex (KIA)

1st Lt Robin Frederick Gatwood (KIA)

The saga of Bat 21 started on the afternoon of the 2nd when two EB-66s (radio call signs Bat 21 and Bat 22) were flying as jamming escorts for a cell of three B-52s on a strike against NVA invasion forces near Camp Carroll, 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 the B-52s. As the B-52s drew close to their target at least 10 missiles were fired in two salvos, but all missed. When the EB-66s turned northwest to clear the target area, a SAM site to the north of the DMZ launched three more missiles, one of which hit Bat 21 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. No other parachutes were seen or SAR beepers heard. Hambleton used his survival radio to speak to an O-2 pilot who had seen the incident. The FAC pilot remembered that a planned evacuation of Quang Tri had just been cancelled, so he called the Sandy flight involved and 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-11H 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 Dong Ha the leading UH-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 UH-1H (67-17801 callsign Blueghost 39) caught fire and crashed a few miles northwest of Dong Ha. The door gunner, SP4 J M Astorga, survived and was captured by the North Vietnamese but the rest of the crew, consisting of 1st Lt B K Kulland, WO1 J W Frink and SP5 R P Paschall, were killed. The remains of these three men were recovered in 1993 and positively identified on 2 April 1994. Astorga was eventually taken to Hanoi and was released on 5 March 1973.

Meanwhile the Joint SAR Center in Saigon, not fully realizing that Hambleton had come down in the path of a major enemy advance, promptly imposed a no-fire zone of 17-miles radius around the downed airman. This was later the source of great controversy

as it severely limited the freedom of action of US and ARVN ground troops to use artillery and air strikes to counter the enemy offensive.

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 1st Lt Clark, who had been shot down on the 3rd, was made by a SAR task force under the direction of Sandy lead, Capt Fred Boli. The attempt ended in disaster when an HH-53C (68-10365 call sign Jolly Green 67) of the 37th ARRS from DaNang was shot down by ground fire as it approached Hambleton's position from the southwest. The helicopter crashed about half a mile south of 1st Lt Clark's hiding place and three miles to the east of Cam Lo village. The crew consisted of Capt Peter Hayden Chapman, 1st Lt 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.

After the war the crash site of the HH-53 was visited by US and Vietnamese investigation teams on three separate occasions in 1989, 1992 and 1994. Some human remains were eventually recovered in 1994 and returned to the USA. Three of the crew were identified individually using mitochondrial DNA testing and the remains were finally laid to rest in a group burial at Arlington National Cemetery on 19 November 1997. The burial ceremony included a flyover by two MH-53J Pave Low III helicopters, the successors of the Vietnam era Jolly Green Giants.

After this tragedy the area was declared to be too 'hot' for conventional SAR operations so the JPRC organized a Special Forces team led by Lt Col A Anderson, USMC and Navy SEAL Lt Tom Norris to attempt a rescue by infiltrating enemy territory in darkness. On the night of 9 April Norris and his team of five

Vietnamese SEALs moved along the Mien Giang River and rescued Mark Clark at daybreak and returned to a forward operating base. The base was then shelled by North Vietnamese artillery and two more rescue attempts had to be postponed. On the night of the 12th Norris and his team disguised themselves as Vietnamese fishermen and, despite heavy enemy fire, successfully rescued Lt Col Hambleton bringing an end to his 10-day ordeal.

Lt Norris was badly wounded in another action in October 1972 and was himself rescued from certain death by another Navy Seal, PO Michael Thornton. Both men were later awarded the Medal of Honor for their bravery in these two actions. Tom Norris became a special agent with the FBI after retiring from the Navy.

The successful recovery of Lt Col Hambleton was tempered by the loss of the helicopter crews and the knowledge that, despite an all out effort involving hundreds of sorties, the airborne SAR forces could not complete the rescue. This highlights both the achievements and the limitations of the SAR mission in Southeast Asia. The air defense environment near the DMZ proved too prohibitive for the SAR forces and would probably have resulted in the loss of further aircraft and men had the efforts continued.

However, without the SAR effort and the constant air strikes, Lt Col Hambleton would probably have been captured early on in the incident. It was only through the efforts of the SAR forces that he was able to make his own way to a position where Lt Norris and his SEAL team could complete the rescue.

The Bat 21 rescue has received a large amount of publicity including a 1988 feature film starring Gene Hackman and Danny Glover in a highly dramatized and factually inaccurate account of the incident.

More valuable is *The Rescue of Bat 21* written by Darrell Whitcomb, an OV-10 FAC pilot who was involved in the incident.