

A highly decorated Super Jolly Green pilot tells about "one of the toughest search and rescue missions" of the Vietnam War ...

THE RESCUE OF BENGAL 505 ALPHA

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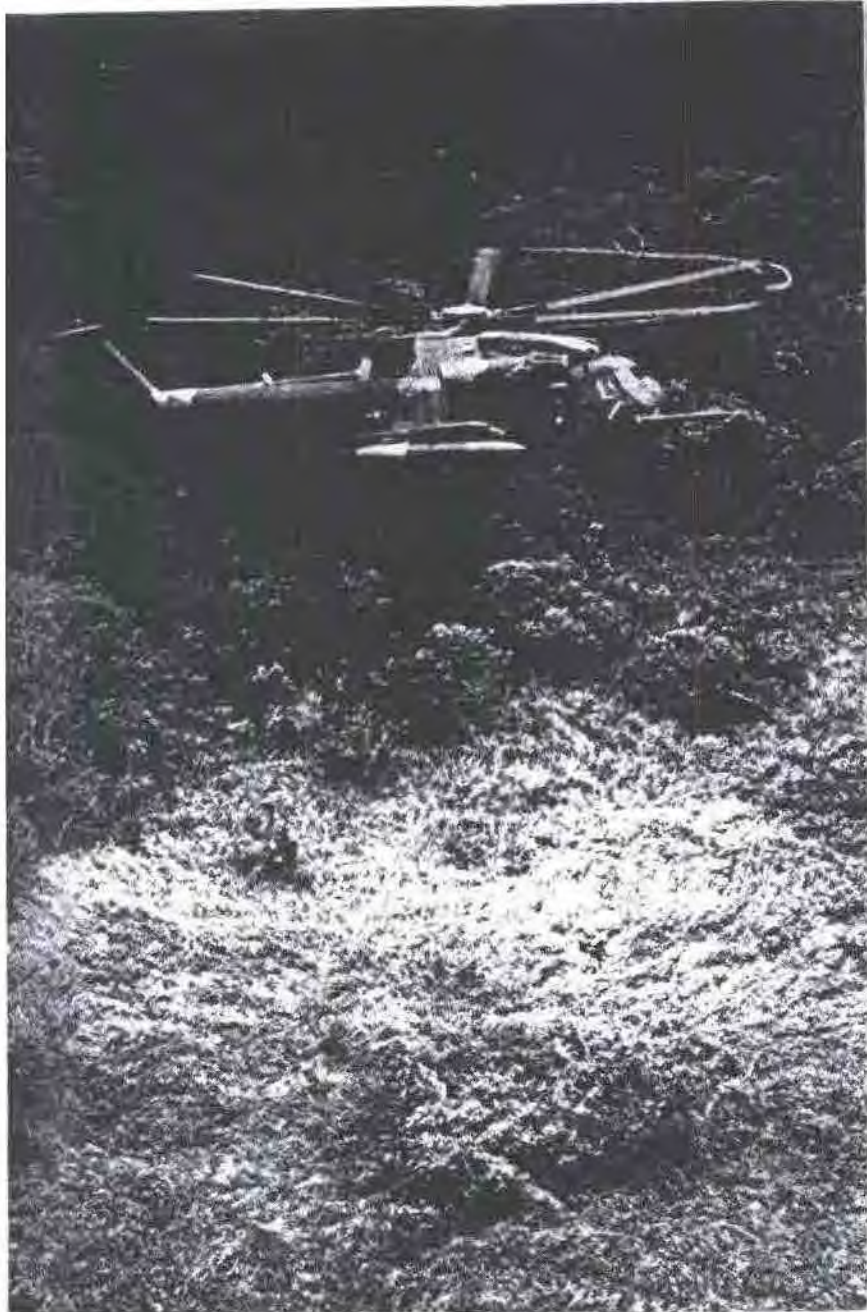
Seventh Air Force turned down our request for forty-eight fighters to clear out the guns. It was April 10, 1972. Every available fighter was targeted against North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops and tanks surrounding An Loc. NVA reinforcements were still pouring across the DMZ. We were given two F-105 Iron Hand aircraft for anti-SAM coverage and a few F-4s.

The weather was bad, too. A forward air controller (FAC) in an OV-10 got into the area the first night and established voice contact with the survivor, but low ceilings prevented fighter strikes for the first day and a half. On the afternoon of the second day, the strikes couldn't quiet enough of the guns for us to risk the easy-target helicopters.

The weather improved on the third day. We made a try for the survivor, but new guns opened up and the helicopters never got past their holding point. Our hearts sank as we turned homeward and heard Capt. Dan Gibson, FAC in Nail 27, ordering area denial ordnance around the survivor to keep enemy troops away.

The next day, we were weathered out again.

We could imagine how the sur-



"The Super Jolly Green Giant is a fantastic machine. Ask the man who's flown one on a combat rescue. Better yet, ask the man who's ridden one home after an otherwise bad day."

WHEN you're on rescue alert at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) RTAFB, Thailand, midnight phone calls mean trouble.

"Briefing at 0300 local," was all the dispatcher said.

The best I could hope for was that my helicopter and crew would be the one to make a "save." As it turned out, we didn't; but we had a box seat at one of the toughest search and rescue (SAR) missions of the war. And there was plenty of action to go around.

"This is going to be a real shoot-

out," one of the A-1 Sandy pilots told me after that first early morning briefing.

The objective was Bengal 505 Alpha, a Navy A-6A crewman who'd gone down on a night mission between Tchepone, Laos, and the demilitarized zone (DMZ). At least twenty antiaircraft artillery (AAA) sites and two surface-to-air missile (SAM) installations surrounded the survivor. An AC-130 had been downed by a SAM near Tchepone two weeks earlier. SAM sites were active all along the DMZ.



The author, Capt. Dale Stovall, is a 1967 graduate of the Air Force Academy. As an HH-53 Jolly Green pilot in SEA, he flew some of the deepest penetration rescue missions of the war, including the rescue of Capt. Roger Locher, who was shot down north of Hanoi in May 1972. Captain Stovall has been awarded the Air Force Cross, Silver Star with cluster, the DFC, and several Air Medals. He is now assigned to Hq. Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, Scott AFB, Ill.

vivor, Marine Corps Maj. Clyde D. Smith, must feel. He knew we were trying our damndest, but time was running out. The NVA troops were searching for him, and they had a good idea of his location. Things weren't going his way.

After four days of frustration and delay, we started the engines of our HH-53C Super Jolly Green Giant for another attempt. On a SAR scramble, we would probably have launched from the taxiway and done all of our planning in flight. But this wasn't that kind of mission.

Volunteer Mission

We taxied to the runway for a rolling takeoff, the SAR plan firmly etched in our minds from days and nights of conferences with other Jolly Green, Sandy (A-1H), and Nail (OV-10) crews. Intelligence and the Rescue Coordination Center had given us custom-tailored maps and all the data at hand. A lot of behind-the-scenes people have a hand in a SAR of this magnitude.

At liftoff we were near the Super Jolly Green's maximum gross weight of 42,000 pounds—12,000 pounds of it in fuel, enough for six hours of flight. Two converted F-105 center-line tanks each contained 650 gallons. This external supply could be jettisoned for maximum performance.

Ahead of us, Jolly Green 32, piloted by Capt. Ben Orrell, had the coveted "low-bird" position and would be the primary rescue helicopter. As "high" or back-up, our Jolly Green 62 would attempt immediate recovery of any rescue forces shot down.

When a mission broke, each crew tried to jockey into "low-bird" position and earn the satisfaction of saving a fellow American from capture or death. By mutual agreement—after heated but friendly discussion—today was Ben's turn.

We were all volunteers for the mission. The 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron commander had declared the mission "volunteer" because of the limited SAR resources and the very hostile environment. No one on the two alert crews backed out.

Neither did anyone in the other two HH-53s that would launch, along with six more A-1s, an hour and a half behind us. They would be the backup force if we had to pull out for fuel—or less desirable reasons—in mid-SAR.

The Super Jolly Green is not a high-performance aircraft, but it can outclimb the OV-10 and A-1 when all are near maximum gross weight at the start of a SAR. Cruising 120 to 130 knots fully loaded—less at higher altitudes—we sometimes passed the OV-10 when it was heavy.

En route to the initial holding point, the A-1s flew "lazy eights" around the two Jollys, watching for ground fire. Maj. Jim Harding in Sandy 01 would be on-scene commander.

The SAR Force Moves In

King 21, HC-130P, was already on station. It would be airborne mission commander for the SAR force and tanker for the helicopters. Everyone knew the plan by heart.

The A-1Hs and an OV-10 would go into the SAR area while the heli-

copters held safe west of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The run-in would be in two stages: a twenty-six-mile-high altitude run across the western part of the NVA route structure to the "high bird's" holding point over a mountaintop; then a twenty-four-mile, low-level run across the eastern route structure for Jolly 32.

Keeping busy to ease the tension, the crew checked personal equipment—Air Force survival vest, pistol, AR-15 rifle, gas mask, and parachute. Each crewman wore an armored helmet and would don forty-five pounds of titanium body armor before the run-in. These preparations became very personal as the radios told us of strike activity in the SAR area.

A Jolly Green pilot must learn to separate four radio conversations—UHF, HF, VHF, and FM. The survivor and Sandy low (01) are on UHF, the helicopters and other A-1s on FM, and King works HF and VHF.

When we reached the holding point we could hear Dan Gibson, in his OV-10, talking to a flight of Navy A-7s. More than seventy Navy A-7s and F-4s had left "weathered-in" targets in the DMZ to help out. We had to attempt a run-in today while we had the extra support.

Just prior to crossing the trail, we refueled. The HC-130 came up from below and behind the helicopters and slowed to 110 knots, and both helicopters moved into holding position above and behind his wingtip. Ben was first to refuel from the eighty-one-foot hose. Then it was our turn.

We dropped behind and slightly above the gently swinging forty-two-inch drogue basket with our nine-foot refueling probe extended to eighteen feet. The tip of the probe was four feet in front of and seven feet below the six big rotor blades turning at 185 rpm. The air was choppy, but the Jolly Green is very stable, and we connected on first attempt. Hooked to the drogue, we climbed slightly above and behind the wingtip where we could draft off the King and use twenty percent less power to stay in formation.

Blade stall is a problem when refueling at altitude. If disconnect occurs with the helicopter almost full, the combination of altitude and weight makes it very difficult to attain 15 knots overtake speed. The

HH-53 begins to shudder and shake, threatening any loose tooth fillings, but there is ample warning before the helicopter goes out of control.

Refueling complete, both crews ran our combat checklists: landing gear lowered and isolated from the rest of the hydraulics to prevent leakage from small-arms hits; aircraft commander monitoring UHF only; the three Miniguns test-fired at both 2,000- and 4,000-round-per-minute settings.

We also had two M-60 machine guns aboard in case we were forced down and the electrically powered Miniguns became useless.

The clamshell doors on the front of each engine were closed against the debris which would be generated by the eighty-knot rotor downwash of the helicopter in a fifty-foot hover. The flight mechanic readied the hydraulic hoist with the heavy forest penetrator at the end of its 240-foot steel cable.

The crew donned body armor, and the pilots pulled the armored wings of their seats forward. Instinctively, we sat a little deeper in

the seats. The floor of the cockpit and the major control systems and transmissions are protected by 1,300 pounds of titanium armor plate—effective against small-arms fire. The Minigun on the back ramp sits in a titanium tub to shield the gunner.

The Guns Come Up

Both helicopters drew 57-mm fire as we crossed the trail, and we finally reached our holding point by dodging from cloud to cloud. From 14,000 feet, we could see a tracer-filled sky and smoke from the bombs as the Sandys and Air Force and Navy F-4s and A-7s started their bomb runs only seconds apart.

Dan Gibson was a busy FAC.

"Start your run-in, Jolly," ordered Harding as he sent Sandy 02 to lead the helicopter in.

Ben made a twisting autorotation to treetop level. Banking and using power to prevent rotor overspeed, he dropped at more than 6,000 feet per minute. In case of loss of power,

a helicopter pilot can autorotate to a safe landing by gaining lift from the inertia built up in the rotor system. In full autorotation, the Super Jolly drops at 4,500 feet per minute. We wore parachutes because a hit in the transmission case could cause loss of cooling oil and resultant transmission failure in less than sixty seconds.

Jolly 32 was above its red line of 170 knots as Ben skimmed the trees, "jinking" to keep the enemy gunners guessing. Eighteen miles out two 57-mm guns opened up. The A-1s hit one, and the other called it quits.

Eight Navy A-7s laid 500-pound bombs on both sides of the helicopter to form a corridor. Air Force F-4s sprinkled antipersonnel, delayed-action cluster bombs ahead of the Jolly to force the enemy into cover.

"Jolly, hold your position!" Harding spotted a trap as three 23-mm guns and automatic weapons fired into the helicopter's path just three miles from the survivor.

The big helicopter swung into a

The end of a successful rescue mission. Former Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown called the work of ARRS crews "one of the most outstanding human dramas in the history of the Air Force." ARRS crews made 2,624 combat saves in SEA.





Big, tough, and heavily armed, the Sikorsky Jolly Greens often had to fight their way into and out of rescue areas to make seemingly impossible saves. The Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service crews who manned them were among the most decorated airmen of the Vietnam War.

tight seventy-degree bank over a small hill, and a polka-dot light pattern criss-crossed the cabin floor as small-arms fire from a bunker fifty feet below opened holes in the Jolly's skin. Sgt. Bill Brinson was hit in the knee before he silenced the ground fire with the rear Minigun.

Twenty-one miles away, at our operating ceiling at 16,000 feet, our hearts stopped at the "hold" order. The heater wasn't working and it was below freezing in the cabin—but we were sweating. Someone else would be hit if we didn't get the SAR over soon.

SAM sites on both sides of us had turned on their radars. Hypoxic from the altitude, we missed the significance of two calls of "Shrikes away" as the Iron Hand F-105s knocked out both radar vans. We worried until we were out of range.

"Pop Your Smoke"

"Let's go, Jolly."

Far ahead, Sandys 02, 03, and 04

had wiped out the NVA trap and laid down a smoke corridor with white phosphorous bombs. The big "low bird" roared toward the survivor as Ben called, "Pop your smoke, Bengal. Pop your smoke!"

A1C Bill Liles, flight mechanic and hoist operator, directed the pilot into a hover over a spot on the side of the ridge where red smoke was coming up through sixty-foot trees. He lowered the forest penetrator to the ground.

On the ground and further down the ridge, Major Smith watched helplessly as his smoke drifted under the jungle canopy before rising into the trees about fifty yards uphill.

As the helicopter hovered above the only smoke the crew could see, Smith scrambled and clawed his way through the dense jungle in an adrenalin-charged drive toward the life-saving penetrator.

"Ground fire! Ground fire! Nine o'clock. Top of the ridge!"

A1C Kenneth Cakebread in the

left window saw NVA firing down on the helicopter, but couldn't return fire because the Miniguns can't be elevated to shoot through the rotor path.

Careful of the suspended hoist, Captain Orrell turned the helicopter to bring the tailgun to bear, simultaneously calling for fighters. The injured Sergeant Morrow returned fire just as a Sandy dove on the ridge, 20-mm cannon blazing.

Frustrated, Orrell ordered Liles to retract the hoist for another try at locating the survivor. Then came Liles' surprised voice as the penetrator cleared the trees with a man dangling from the cable.

Jubilantly, Liles pulled Smith aboard and stowed the penetrator—its three seats and straps still neatly folded.

Smith had reached the cable just as the penetrator cleared the ground. Ignoring the limbs and debris swirling around him in the rotor wash, he snapped a mountain climber's link from his survival vest to the penetrator as it was pulled skyward at 200 feet per minute.

"Survivor's on board. We're coming out!"