

Capt Don Sutton, Jolly 65 Bravo -- In his own words:

It was 3 April 1972 that we made our rescue attempt. Bat-21B went down the previous day on the 2nd of April. LCDR Jay Crowe, U.S. Coast Guard and I were Alpha Low for April 3rd, which meant that we were going to be the first rescue attempt for Lt Col Hambleton. I can't remember how long we orbited before making the run in. Darrell Whitcomb's research says that it was about 9:30am, I think. There were a lot of clouds over the area, so we didn't see much until we started to descend. The Nail FAC (turns out that it was Nail 38, also shotdown later that day with Capt Bill Henderson & 1st Lt Mark Clark) led us down through the clouds. We didn't get below the clouds by much (can't remember the altitude, but probably 2,000 feet, or so) before we started taking AAA hits.

As the copilot, my responsibility was to ride the flight controls in case of injury to the AC and to monitor the cockpit instruments. I looked outside a little, but really concentrated on what was happening in the cockpit. Outside, I could see a convoy of tanks that we were flying right into. Inside, annunciator lights started going on and I called out what they were, etc. We lost one hydraulic system and then started losing instruments.

Jay was trying to stop the helicopter's descent and get going back into the clouds. His instruments were gone and he told me to take control of the aircraft, which I did. We were also losing hydraulic pressure on #1 system which was the primary for the main rotor and backup for the tail rotor (we had already lost #3 hydraulic system which was primary for tail rotor).

I noticed right away that I had to have the left rudder pedal all the way depressed to keep us flying somewhat straight. As it turned out, Jay and I both had to keep the rudder pedal depressed, because neither of us could do it alone. We had just enough hydraulic pressure on the tail rotor to keep us from spinning. We got back up in the clouds and the enemy hits stopped. When we got above the clouds, we made sure everybody was OK and did a battle damage assessment and controllability assessment. We weren't sure whether we would have to bail out or not, but prepared the crew to do so, if necessary.

We flew back to Hue-Phu Bai AAF and made a run-on landing on the Phu Bai taxiway. We could never have hovered due to the hydraulic system problems. As we touched down, we saw a crater in the taxiway (122mm rocket damage) that we were headed for and had to jerk the airplane up and over it. That was a little tough because of the hydraulic issues. When we pulled up on the collective, we couldn't keep it straight, but got it squared away on the other side of the crater. We rolled to a stop and took some very deep breaths.

I can't remember whether it was Alpha High who followed us in to Hue-Phu Bai and took us back to Da Nang, but we left the plane there for maintenance. Maintenance made some quick fixes to the hydraulic lines, and filled it with MIL-H-5606 fluid. Another crew flew it back to Da Nang later that day, I believe.

We were part of the history of the BAT-21B SAR effort, but the real heroes are the six soles who lost their lives a couple of days later during the shutdown of Jolly Green 67.

I found out that Jay Crowe had died in 2003. He and I met in Boston, probably in 2000 or so and had a really nice conversation and catch up on old times. He was a really good guy and a great pilot. He taught me a lot about rescue.

Regards,

Don Sutton