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Locher rescued after 23 days north of Hanoi

A U.S. Air Force search and rescue task force ventured north of Hanoi early this month to recover an Air Force F-4 crew member who evaded the North Vietnamese for 23 days before he was rescued.

Capt. Roger C. Locher, a 28-year-old weapons system operator with the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing was extremely weak—he lost 15 pounds during his ordeal—but otherwise in good condition. Rescue men acclaimed the captain's presence of mind throughout the evasion and rescue.

Locher and the F-4 Phantom pilot, who is still missing, were shot down May 10 by a MIG-21 firing a heat-seeking missile. Shortly before, Locher had bagged his third MIG. He previously scored MIG hits on Feb. 21 and May 8. When he was shot down the captain was flying his 407th combat mission.

The rescue task force included HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant helicopters to make the actual pickup, A-1 Sandy propeller-driven fighters to locate the downed airman, suppress ground fire and lead in the helicopters, HC-130 King command aircraft which also refueled the helicopters on the long journey, and F-4 Phantom and F-105 Thunderchief jet fighters to protect the slower-moving aircraft.

The task force encountered heavy ground fire on its way to and from the captain's mountainside perch.

Describing his downing, Locher said, "We immediately went out of control, flopping from side to side. Then fire started coming in the back of the cockpit. It seared my canopy with bubbles and I couldn't see out anymore. The airplane slowed down and we went into a flat spin.

"I told the pilot, 'I think I'm going to have to get out. It's starting to burn pretty bad back here.'

"I yanked for what seemed like an eternity

on my primary ejection. The next thing I heard was a big blast. When I opened my eyes, I was in my parachute and just about then I could see the airplane hit the ground right below.

"I looked around and was going into a kind of deep-dished valley. I aimed for a steep mountainside and came down through the trees. My heels were on the ground so all I had to do was unbuckle and get out. I just sat down for a minute and listened."

During the next 23 days he subsisted on fruit, nuts and berries. He was very successful in locating water.

"One day I eyed a banana tree all day. It didn't have any bananas on it, but I remembered I could get water out of it. Just before evening I stuck a hole in it and got myself three pints of good banana water."

On another day, he reported, "I went through somebody's garden and stole some chives. They had some pretty good chives there."

The captain changed his position in search of good cover, food and water. He shifted approximately 15 miles during his 23-day ordeal.

"In this one clearing there was a hootch and behind it was a pretty steep little mountain, so I just clambered right up their garden and halfway up their mountain, quite near the top. That's where I stayed the last two days."

Although he had made attempts, the captain had been unable to make radio contact with U.S. aircraft.

"I could hear them bombing and hear the enemy shooting back, so I figured when they stopped shooting that meant they were heading home. I also meant they could listen for people and I could get on the radio.

"I did this yesterday and two flights came up to answer me. That was the first time I made radio contact." (Continued on page 8)

By SSgt. Tom Merchant



U.S. Air Force Photo by Sgt. Charlie R. Stutts

Captain Locher is greeted by Gen. John W. Vogt, commander of Seventh Air Force, after the weapons systems officer was rescued from North Vietnam. He was shot down May 10 and survived 23 days in North Vietnam before being rescued on June 2.