

Flyer rescued after 23 days in North Vietnam

UDORN RTAFB, Thailand -- An Air Force search and rescue task force ventured north of Hanoi 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 weapons system operator with the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, was extremely weak—he lost 15 pounds during his ordeal—but other wise in good condition. Captain Locher and the F-4 Phantom pilot, who is still missing, were shot down by a MIG-21 firing a heat-seeking missile. Shortly before, Captain Locher had bagged his third MIG; he had 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 Giants, A-1 Sandys, 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.

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."

Captain Locher 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 climbed 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. It 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."

The contact triggered the search and rescue penetration deep into North Vietnam. The rescue forces were driven off by MIGs on their first attempt.

The next day, the task force headed north again, led in by the Sandys of the 56th Special Operations Wing. Heavy ground fire failed to dissuade the rescue aircraft as they continued north.

When they approached Captain Locher's position, the Sandys made a pass over him, circled the mountain, made another pass and then led in a Super Jolly Green Giant, commanded by Capt. Dale E. Stovall.

As the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron helicopter moved in,

automatic weapon fire erupted from a nearby hootch. Sgt. Charles B. McQuid and A1C Kenneth W. Cakebread, pararescuemen on the HH-53, silenced the ground fire with their miniguns.

The flight engineer, Sgt. James F. Walsh, lowered the jungle penetrator to Captain Locher, who mounted it on his own power.

"It sure is a good feeling to get that penetrator, strap it on, give a thumbs-up, and hang on."

To evade further ground fire, the helicopter lifted to the top of the mountain as the captain was being hoisted in. Captain Locher was swung onboard and the rescue force headed home.

The trip home was no downhill glide. Every village was a source of ground fire. Trucks, even a train, opened fire on the task force, but the A-1 Sandys returned the fire, not only protecting the helicopters but destroying one locomotive, several railroad cars and trucks.

Other crewmembers on the HH-53 making the pickup were Capt. John H. Gillespie, copilot, and TSgt. Bobbie L. Welborne, combat photographer.

Upon return here, Captain Locher was greeted by Gen. John W. Vogt, commander of Seventh Air Force, who was here on a staff visit.

Captain Locher said, "Those Jolly Greens and Sandys are just great. They did a wonderful job in getting me out of there. I can't thank them enough."

...Team places second

changing ideas and techniques for search and rescue operations, the competition has evolved into a test of team skills in navigation, scramble and precision winching events.

The Alpha crew from Det. 4, 40th ARRWg, Ramstein AB, Germany, included: Captains Leonard and John C. Smith, TSgt. Leroy W. King and SSgt. William G. Wilson.

The Bravo crew from Det. 5, 40th ARRWg, Hahn AB, Germany, included: Maj. William D. McColl, Capt. John W. Christianson, and Staff Sergeants Robert T. Anderson and Carl M. Miller.

Ground crew members included Staff Sergeants Carlos L. Joiner and Donald C. Blair, and Sgt. Gary W. Wasmer.

The teams participating were: Royal Belgian Air Force; Royal Danish Navy and Air Force; French Navy; Federal German Navy and Air Force; Royal Netherlands Navy and Air Force; Italian Air Force; and Britain's Royal Air Force.