

By **SSGT. TOM MERCHANT**

UDORN RTAFB, Thailand — A U.S. Air Force search and rescue task force ventured north of Hanoi June 2 to recover an 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 here, was extremely weak — he lost 15 pounds during his ordeal — but was otherwise in good condition. Rescue men acclaimed his presence of mind throughout the evasion and rescue.

Captain 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, 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 helicopters, A-1 fighters, HC-130 command aircraft and F-4 and F-105 fighters. F-4 and F-105 jet fighters to protect the slower-moving aircraft.

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

Describing his downing, Captain 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."

He ejected into "a kind of deep-dished valley." During the next 23 days he subsisted on fruit, nuts, berries, and water from banana trees.

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

unable to make radio contact with U.S. aircraft until after a June 1 bombing mission.

"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 (June 1) and two flights came up to answer me." The contact triggered the search and rescue mission. The rescue forces were driven off by MIGs on their first attempt.

A second task force headed north again through heavy

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