

Two Phantom pilots rescued near Laos-NVN border

In a search and rescue (SAR) effort that spanned six hours late last month two U.S. Air Force Phantom pilots were rescued near the Laos-North Vietnam border west-southwest of Hanoi.

Maj. Robert C. Miller and Capt. Lynn Allen Aikman were rescued while other two crewmembers aboard the F-4s were listed as missing in action.

Early that morning, a SAR force had been dispatched to look for another downed airmen. But when 1st Lt. Byron Hukee, an A-1 Sandy escort fighter pilot, heard a MIG call and that two additional aircraft were down, he turned the SAR force toward the scene.

"We made voice contact with Major Miller almost immediately, but were not in contact with the other three men. I decided to get the known survivor out of the area immediately," said Hukee, the on-scene commander.

Hukee called in the Super Jolly Green

Giant rescue helicopters. One chopper, piloted by Capt. Bennie F. Orrell, maneuvered over Miller, dropped the jungle penetrator within ten feet of the downed airman and hoisted him into the helicopter.

Because his SAR force was running low on fuel, Hukee turned it home. Two other Sandys came in and began searching for the other airmen on the ground.

"We came on the scene late in the day," explained Maj. James Harding, the on-scene commander for the second rescue attempt. "We made voice contact with the second man and called the Jollys into the area."

All the time, fast movers (jet fighters) and Sandy pilots busied themselves by suppressing ground fire. "We were shooting continually for 45 minutes," Harding said.

Directed by Harding, the first HH-53 went to where Aikman was suspected to be. The crew hovered over the area, but had trouble pinpointing the pilot in the jungle growth.

"When I got a glimpse of his parachute on the side of the hill, I told the guys to put me on the ground so I could get to him," said Sgt. Charles McGrath, one of the two PJs on the chopper. "I was about two feet away from him before he actually saw me," the PJ said.

While McGrath was on the ground, the HH-53 was damaged by ground fire and began losing its hydraulic utility power which operates the penetrator.

The Super Jolly commander, Maj. Lee W. Thacker Jr., decided to jettison the cable so he could get his aircraft away from the heavy small arms fire it was receiving.

When the damaged HH-53 moved out, Capt. Dale E. Stovall and his crew moved their Super Jolly in and lowered its penetrator to Aikman and McGrath.

"As we moved close to the helicopter, I could see ground fire putting holes in its side around the door," McGrath said.

McGrath and Aikman boarded Super Jolly safely and the SAR force returned home.