

23-27 December 1972: This is another one in which the rescuers made a tremendous effort, but ended up needing rescuing. An HH-53C #69-5788 (Call sign Jolly Green 73 - low bird) of the 40th ARRS and crewed by Captain Richard D. Shapiro (P), Captain Miguel A. Pereira (CP), Sgt Charles J. Rouhier (FE), A1C Robert W. Jones (PJ), TSgt John R. Carlson (PJ) and Sgt James W. Cockerill (AP) was lost in Laos while on a SAR mission attempting to rescue F-111A Co-Pilot, Captain William W. Wilson (Call sign Jackel 33 B).

The HH-53C was hit while hovering over Wilson and had to abandon the attempt. Apparently hit in the air refueling probe, the helicopter, which could not air-refuel and was about to run out of fuel, landed and was abandoned on a mountain top northeast of Ban Ban, Laos. The crew was rescued by another HH-53 (Jolly Green 66 - high bird) from the 40th ARRS and crewed by Coast Guard Lt Robert E. Long (P), Lt Ackerson (CP), Sgt Edward D. Foy (FE), Sgt Hulen C. Hammock (PJ), Sgt Mueller (PJ) and Sgt Strong (PJ). Then HH-53C #69-5788 was destroyed by a flight of A-7's. Unfortunately, both F-111A crew members, Captain Robert David Sponeybarger (P) and Lt William W. Wilson (CP) became POWs. They were repatriated on 29 March 1973.

On 23 December 1972, during the attack on the Hanoi port facility at 2138 hours, after pickling off twelve 500-pound bombs and scoring direct hits on the port facility, call sign Jackel 33, piloted by Captain Sponeybarger with his Weapons Systems Officer Captain Bill Wilson, was hit by enemy fire. The crew had to shut down the right engine as they attempted to leave the area. They had been flying a typical F-111 tactical mission when they were hit by small-arms fire - flying at supersonic speed only a few hundred feet altitude. At a point fifty-three miles west of Hanoi, they ejected in a karst area. Beepers from both pilots were picked up on the 24th and rescue forces were launched. The mountains were protruding through a solid undercast which precluded strike aircraft from delivering ordinance and any pickup attempt. Both alpha and bravo pilots were advised to move to higher ground, stay well hidden, and come up on their survival radio whenever Fast Movers were heard. Weather again precluded rescue attempts on the 25th and 26th. On the third day after the ejection, Captain Sponeybarger was captured by North Vietnam Army troops searching for the crew members.

Weather cleared on the 27th and Jolly Green 73 and Jolly Green 66 launched for the rescue area. They refueled with King 27 and rendezvoused with the Sandys just inside the North Vietnamese border. The helicopters started the final run to the rescue area with Captain Dick Shapiro in Jolly Green 73 in the lead and Long in Jolly Green 66 in trail. Jolly Green 66 was instructed to hold 15 miles out with Sandy 03 as cover. Shapiro said that a half mile out he could see the karst area where Jackel 33B was located. It rose about 2,000 feet with a gentle slope to the top. About two thirds of the way up the slope they began taking heavy 50-caliber fire from the right. Shapiro could see the tracers go past the nose and one of the Sandys reported fuel streaming from the right side of the aircraft. The survivor was on a ledge covered with tall elephant grass. A1C Jones

fired his minigun into the gun position silencing it. Jackel 33B popped smoke and Shapiro came to a hover over him.

By this time, they were taking fire from all sides. As the penetrator was being lowered, they took a number of AK-47 rounds in the cockpit from surrounding trees. The co-pilot, Captain Pereira, was hit and they continued taking fire from underneath the aircraft. Jolly Green 73 was zeroed in and the survivor had not climbed on the penetrator. Shapiro executed an immediate egress to the right and down the hill. He said the helicopter went into an almost uncontrollable oscillation which smoothed out as his airspeed went through 80 knots. Shapiro surveyed the damage. He was getting surges in both engines, the hydraulic system was indicating minimum pressure and oscillating, he was getting yaw kicks, the radar altimeter was out and the UHF radio was intermittent. Long volunteered to go in for another attempt but it was decided that given the present conditions, there was no way a rescue attempt would be successful.

Long followed Shapiro out and handled radio communications for him. He informed King that Shapiro would need fuel and to meet them. When Jolly Green 73 tried to extend the fueling probe it would not budge. Shapiro tried to refuel without the probe extended. As soon as contact was made fuel started streaming from the probe and he got a disconnect. Fuel was critical and Jolly Green 73 was going to have to find a place to land. Long in Jolly Green 66 had been monitoring the situation and had already picked out an area and directed Shapiro to it. When Shapiro retarded the throttles for landing all power was lost and the rotor blades began oscillating badly. The crew was out of the aircraft within 30 seconds after touchdown.

In Captain Shapiro's mission summary, he states the following; "I can't give enough credit to Lt Long. On egress I was having communications problems. Lt Long took care of communications for me. Realizing that I would have to land in mountainous terrain because of impending fuel starvation, Lt Long scouted ahead of our route of flight for a possible secure landing area. When I made the decision to land the aircraft and requested assistance, Lt Long was already hovering over a spot not more than a mile away. As I entered the area, he began talking me into touchdown. He landed shortly after I touched down, as close as possible to us. His crew had us on board within a short period. Had it not been for his invaluable assistance, our crew would have been engaging enemy personnel during the next few hours."

Captain Wilson managed to evade capture for two more days, but while attempting to recover a food and water packet dropped by orbiting A-7 Sandys, he was captured.