

That's The Way It Was Combat SAR in Vietnam

By LCDR Joseph L. "Jay" Crowe USCG

The goal of the combat rescue and recovery units during the Vietnam conflict was to get to those in peril before the enemy did. Whether the mission was an extraction or the pickup of a downed airman, each time they were successful it was a win! This was called a "save," but a "save" was much more than a statistic to these men. A "save" was a person, and they took it personally. They were the "Jolly Green Giants" normally referred to as the "Jolly Greens."

Col. Frank Buzze who flew F-100s in the war wrote the following; "They were called Jolly Greens with near reverence by US combat pilots. Jet pilots are a pretty individualistic lot and will argue about almost anything but a sure way to start something is for someone to bad-mouth the Jollys. No one did."

LCDR Joseph L. "Jay" Crowe USCG was one of the Coast Guard Aviators that flew with the Air Force 37th ARRS Squadron Jolly Greens. At the completion of his tour, he wrote a descriptive Vietnam After Action Report requested by Rear Admiral James W. Moreau USCG. The report is both factual and personal and as you read it you will feel the emotion as Jay recalled events and provided insight. This is Jay's report.

Combat Air Rescue May 1971- May 1972

It seems that whenever I talk of Viet Nam one of two subjects come into the conversation. First, as you will see in some of my slides, Vietnam is a country of tremendous natural beauty largely undisturbed by man. Unfortunately, we seldom carried cameras, for reasons of security, however, I have some pictures and will rely on them to tell this story. Meanwhile here I'll struggle with the second less tangible but more lasting impression of men pursuing the noblest mission of all, the rescue of a comrade in arms.

The reception at Sheppard AFB, the first step in training, made it apparent that the Coasties before me had left giant green footprints to fill. The instructors, all one or two tour Jolly Green Giant veterans, were quick to point out what was expected. The Coasties were to provide the helicopter experience but more importantly the ability to think rescue. This idea was reinforced by the instructors at Eglin AFB while studying tactics and transitioning to the "Super Jolly" or HH53C. Without a doubt, these men were the best instructors I've had in aviation not only had they all been Jolly Greens but the majority of them had recently returned from the Son Tay prison camp raid. The performance of the many transport pilots they trained to be tactical helicopter pilots is a tribute to their dedication and ability. The time at Eglin was my introduction to the size and sophistication of the Military Airlift Command. It appeared to me then and later that the needs of a small unit occasionally got lost in the vastness of the MAC mission.

The seven months of training were completed by two survival schools. The first, at Fairchild AFB, included escape, evasion and POW training, which was really quite an experience. The second, at Clark AFB, was to tailor the Fairchild training to the jungle environment. It was the last stop before Da Nang, Republic of Viet Nam.

Every effort is made to ease a “Newbie” into the routine but it is still a shock to realize everything you’ve read or heard in seven months of training is about to happen. A “Newbie’s” first night at the “party hootch” is on the house and my first night was quite an indoctrination – climaxed with my first rocket attack. Rocket attacks soon become just part of the routine and eventually hardly interrupt your conversation but your first one is quite an eye opener.

The first step in country is a series of intelligence and tactics briefings designed to bring of training home to South East Asia (SEA). Our area of responsibility was all of North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and the eastern half of Laos, with deployment responsibility for the remainder of Laos and the South China Sea. Where most pilots learn small areas in detail and the remainder, in general, we tried to learn the entire area in general and how to get specific information on a small area when needed. The reading required was voluminous, not the least of which was just learning the language of tactical flying, e.g., TIC, troops in contact; house, base of origin; fast movers- fighters; slow movers – anything else; slicks, guns, coveys, nails, triple nickel,, go green, smart and dumb ordnance, etc. (Occasionally I will refer to an unclassified code word for certain mission aircraft without explanation because to the best of my knowledge, the specifics remain classified.) The coordination and cooperation of all Air Force units in this phase was outstanding, no question was ignored. On a pilot to pilot basis, I have never seen such an excellent relationship. Rescue in SEA is a relatively small organization similar in construction to a Coast Guard Area. The Joint Rescue Control Center, call sign Joker, worked with the Rescue Control Centers at Tan Son Nhut, call sign Queen; the Rescue Control Center Nakhon Phanom, call sign Jack; the Rescue Control Center Gulf of Tonkin (Navy) call sign Harbor Master; and the Airborne Mission Commander call sign King.

The air campaign was active in southern North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. On June 4, 1971, a Covey 504, an Air Force OV-10A FAC from the 20th TASS was shot down east the Bolovens Plateau in the southeastern corner of Laos. When hit they had just enough time to broadcast a mayday and cross one ridgeline before losing control and ejecting. Before they reached the ground another Covey had them in sight. King had diverted four sets of fast movers to the position and a flight of Navy A-4s passing by for diversion. We were diverted from the Gulf of Tonkin shortly later and the Sandys joined us at 10,000 ft. over Da Nang en route to an outside holding point. The Sandys and Jollies are initially held in a “safe” area until fast movers have worked the area to locate and destroy AA guns and SAM’s. Radio contact with survivors is essential in this phase to facilitate the survivor authentication procedures. Eventually, the FAC controlling the fighter bombers is satisfied the big stuff is silenced and calls for Sandy lead to take charge of the mission. Sandy lead then moves the recovery to an inside holding point at high altitude and descends to evaluate the survivors’ exact location,

terrain features for masking, ingress and egress routes to troll for ground fire. In this mission, we held at 15,000 ft. on the tanker (another King job) and watched the show through the clouds. After initial strafing runs the Sandys slowed down and tried to draw enemy fire. They were successful. One area was too active to sanitize so they decided on the Jolly run-in they would smoke it off. The other was far enough from the survivors it was not a hazard in the hover as we would be lower than they could depress their guns on the run in and run out. The survivors were in a long box canyon so it was decided to drop below the canyon rim for screening and proceed at the treetops and max speed to the survivors, about three miles. When the Sandys were satisfied all was ready lead sent his wingman up to lead our lead Jolly (alpha low) to the initial point (IP). Sandy lead meanwhile positions himself to mark the IP and be prepared to roll in on any guns that come up during our decent autorotation towards the IP leaving alpha high to act as plane guard for the task force. If any member of the ACR force is downed alpha high immediately descends to try a quick recovery before the bad guys get organized.

Descending through about 8,000 feet at 7000 ft/min rate of descent I began to realize how heart stopping this business could get. Rolling out on ingress at 170 kts at treetop level, wiping the steam off the windshield, watching fighters lay smoke Sandys swirl around in rocket, machine gun and CBU passes will really get the adrenalin flowing. By the time you can discern their tracers from yours it's too busy to do anything but trust in God and the Sandys and jink like hell. We had little trouble locating the first survivor and hoisting him; however, the second man was more difficult. He was on a jungle covered ridge within the canyon. The trees were so tall our 250 ft. of cable would not quite reach and the slope so steep, he could not move to it. We thought for a minute and Don decided to see how effective a tree cutter our rotor was. We eased in and down into the foliage cutting the soft crown of the of the jungle the five or six feet needed to reach our man. The egress and climb to altitude were uneventful. I cannot describe the sensation of victory I had as we rode wing on King taking fuel with our fighters making aileron roll passes and loops around us. The sky was never quite so blue or the clouds so puffy and white. A good party was had by all that night.

*An interesting side note:

The aircraft commander of Covey 504, Capt Art Moxon was giving his prospective relief, Maj. Sam Ross his first area familiarization flight. For a touch of irony one week later, on their next flight, they were shot down again and my helicopter rescued them again.

This was the best organized mission I was on. I was fortunate to have my initiation to ACR with one of the few experienced rescue pilots left in the country. As the dry season wore on with no activity, all the combat experienced pilots left without many opportunities to pass on their knowledge. The stateside training ground to a halt and we started getting unqualified pilots to train in country. I was put in charge of this program. Trying to qualify new pilots for combat in a new aircraft in a combat zone with no secure area was quite a challenge; especially since there are no provisions for on the job training in the MAC regulations, which meant for stateside school training criterion applied. The idea that we were taking battle damage on training flights really upset the picture and we were barraged with inspections. Eventually, the squadron was put in the awkward

position of either rubber stamping a qualification or disobeying the instructions and teaching what was needed. A compromise between these extremes was reached, however, ten pilots had spent one third of their tour in the combat zone trying to get qualified to fly combat missions. Some of them never did get to practice a low level run in or hover over the trees until their first mission. This was not the only breakdown in training. During the critique of a poorly coordinated mission, I learned that except for the officer in charge of Queen, not one controller had either served in Rescue or been to training on the job. Personnel that were at least rescue orientated from previous assignments would have adapted much quicker both as pilots and controllers. As it was, we spent a great deal of off duty time going over the basics of conducting a SAR case.

During the unusual lull in the dry season combat operations, I had two missions that were typical Coast Guard SAR made easy by new sophisticated equipment, the safe, simple aerial refueling system and tremendous improvement in night illumination equipment are but two examples of Viet Nam technology. A Korean soldier on a troop ship 400 miles offshore developed acute appendicitis requiring immediate surgery. With a tanker available a minimum range mission was simplified and the service to the patient was improved. Instead of fueling to maximum gross weight, rushing a hoist at heavyweight and having to return to the nearest point of landing we were able to depart Da Nang at our standard weight, thereby increasing our cruise speed, refuel before the point of no return, make a safe standard hoist and return to the nearest appropriate medical facility. Theoretically, refueling would allow a helicopter to go whatever distance was required for the mission. One classified mission I planned involved a flight of 1300 miles.

The second Coast Guard mission was the crash of a OH-6 LOCH in the bay south of Hue. Once tactics were worked out with the specter he turned a dark rainy night into VFR day. By providing a source of datum for them to save their light to constant, they provided illumination of an area approximately two square miles. This obviously was a tremendous asset for this mission and would have numerous uses in the Coast Guard.

In contrast to these missions, I flew a classified mission from our forward operating location at Bien Hoa. This was totally different from a Coast Guard mission tactic: only the aircraft commander knew our objective and the destination was revealed only as course and distance. One entire flight was lights out; radio silence, night formation and the other was a long low altitude dash to our holding point; Fifty feet at 170 kts is exciting. Fortunately, our portion of the on scene tactics was not required, however, I consider it a privilege to have been an element leader on such a mission. This was one of the highlights of my tour.

For us, Da Nang was a slightly defiled microcosm of the remaining world. The War with nothing to do one day and all out hell breaking loose the next accelerated and accentuated everything except time which never passed. For a glorious moment like the return flight from Bien Hoa there were times of terrible embarrassment, usually centered around our lack of relations with the Vietnamese. Benign neglect was not the word for the actual (not official) attitude towards our host on the Da Nang Air Base, a Vietnamese airfield. Col Harris, the Jolly Green Commander was the only one of several Air Force Officers

invited that attended the change of command reception for a Vietnamese wing commander. Many even failed to send regrets.

Everything seemed to be extremes. In exchange for a seven day work week with long hours, there was R&R and leave. Never was a week's leave better or faster or the wife more lovely. For a year of G.I. food there was the four day eating orgy in Bangkok with Capt Budd and the SEA section

As the last operational fighter base, we attracted every conceivable form of inspection team. Every level of command in the USAF inspected the Jolly Greens and Senators dropped in on fact finding visits frequently. Of course, everything came to a stop for these visits except ACR. However, we did have an effective mosquito control problem. Life at Da Nang, despite an abundant supply of things to complain about, was reasonably comfortable.

Approximately midway through my tour, I changed collateral duties from training and scheduling to assistant operations officer. Gradually a very workable and enjoyable working relationship evolved. Maj. Jerry Lange, a fine pilot, and officer handled the mountain of administrative work and I was given a free reign in planning and coordinating ACR missions. This was an excellent experience for me. I worked with all the branches of our forces and the VNAF. The drawdown of forces made it essential to get support and especially intelligence information from as many sources as possible. One of the tremendous inefficiencies of the one year tour is the loss of local knowledge and the word of mouth communication. For example, at our level, and at queen no one knew the Navy had a SAR package or their capabilities. With a little talk, a visit to the Coral Sea and a receptive command structure our commitment to the Gulf of Tonkin orbit dropped from 90% to 50% of our aircraft.

Planning our portion of December missions in North Vietnam was a real education in staff coordination for me. The amount of detailed coordination is amazing. Without exception, the operational commanders and men I worked with were true professionals. During a mission almost everybody free would gather around the operations centers HF radio to listen for Kings SITREPs. Just because I was in on the planning did not allow me to worry more than any other airman in the room. The Jollys were really a team and the elation at King's "phase Bravo complete" was matched only by the utter devastation of "the Jolly is down". My first loss was Thanksgiving Day 1971 when Jolly Green 70 was shot down 10 miles out of Saigon returning from a successful ACR mission. This was particularly hard because both pilots were men we had trained in country and it was during what should have been a routine flight home. The impact on the squadron and the soul searching cannot be described.

My second loss will serve as an example of the courage and dedication to duty that is the tradition of the Jolly Greens and Sandys. On April 2, 1972, an EB66 was shot down just south of the DMZ but behind friendly lines. From the routine start developed the BAT 21B ACR mission; the longest and perhaps most costly mission of the war. We were alarmed by the reported SAM hit that far south but never guessed what it foretold. By

chance, I was alpha low in the morning and there was a lot of good natured kidding about completing my hat trick. (saves in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam). All intelligence information made it sound fairly easy. During the night there had been sporadic fire but nothing alarming to the RESCAP, so we planned a quick troll of the area by Sandys and a pick up try. As soon as we arrived in holding, we knew it wasn't routine. The Sandys were beaten off by ground fire. Therefore, most of the morning was spent sanitizing the area with fast movers until we thought everything was suppressed. Again, the Sandys went trolling; this time no reaction, so they called in the jollies. In the most exciting 90 seconds of my life we descended, saw tanks, tracked vehicles, and troops took forty hits and climbed back into the clouds. They had been hiding all around BAT 21B – a trap. Just before dark that day, Col Harris on another Jolly tried and was badly damaged.

At intelligence that evening we learned that the friendly lines had been pushed back by some form of NVA invasion. We had not been briefed in the morning because it was Vietnamese intelligence and they could only brief what was confirmed by American sources. The war is over syndrome was rapidly evaporating. The next day, while we were in orbit, two tries were made by Army teams resulting in three aircraft lost and one crew killed.

That night we started to get a feel for the magnitude of the invasion. Two entire NVA regular divisions, the 306th and 308th, were in the immediate area with some 20,000 men. Our plan for 5 April was to spend the whole day in diversionary strikes while laying some area denial ordinance around our survivor. Late that day an OV-10 controlling fighters for us was shot down. Both pilots ejected and one made it to hiding, the other was captured and shot, they were taking no prisoners. Also, six of eight Sandys flying that day took hits, one crash landing at Da Nang. We had two survivors and no new ideas. The next day, 6 April 1971 was to be devoted to delivering food, water, and batteries to the survivors. However, after working the area the action appeared to move north of their position and an approach from the rear seemed possible. Capt. Peter Chapman and his crew in alpha low volunteered to try. Twenty fast movers strikes were set up on the known gun positions and ten Sandys lead the way in. Despite SAMs and AA fire the team reached a position over the survivor. Jolly Green 67 was destroyed by enemy fire during their descent. There were no survivors. Capt. Chapman and his crew were nominated for the Medal of Honor. All Ten Sandys were damaged. It was apparent that conventional Tactics would not work. The decision was made to suspend the mission.

Capt Fred Bolin, Sandy lead and I found this impossible to accept after so much sacrifice. We devised a plan for a covert ground attempt and submitted it to Saigon. The next day LtCol Anderson USMC walked into the squadron and it couldn't be better if it had been the real John Wayne. The remainder, if released will make a fascinating novel. Basically, I was to control all air support and develop a code to deliver to the survivors so that through cover aircraft I could control their movements their movements to rendezvous with a team that had penetrated the NVA lines. LT Tom Morris, USN, formed and lead the recovery team. All branches of both the U.S. and Vietnamese forces were used at one time or another in the next seven days. After eleven days and nights, LtCol Hambleton and LT Clark were carried to safety. I find it hard to praise men like Col Anderson, Lt

Norris, Capt Chapman and their crews and I was there, so is it any wonder there are so many doubters at home.

There can be no doubt about the magnitude of the final Jolly Green Operation of my tour, the evacuation of Quang Tri Citadel. As the NVA invasion progressed the entire command structure, including most American Advisors, moved into the Citadel and were encircled by three NVA divisions. Eventually, the siege was tightened to the point air evacuation was required. Although normally an Army mission the Jollys were selected because of our greater capacity and firepower. When first trying to plan the mission, I felt it would be impossible to complete; however, we were ordered to try.

Because of the amount of classified planning I had been doing and the high risk, my commander refused to let me fly in the mission. Although a relief, it only made the planning more difficult. This was the only mission briefing in the year that I asked Col Harris to be present for. To look six jolly and ten Sandy in the eye and brief a plan that expected 25% losses and would be considered a success with 50% took all I had. However, we had our reward when they all made it home safely with 132 survivors. The champagne flowed freely that night.

I must emphasize the following conclusions are extremely personal and developed from a limited exposure to Combat Rescue in SEA had three facets. Direct front line support by U.S. Army "Dustoffs". Water recovery of strike pilots by the U.S. Navy "Big Mothers". Behind the lines jungle recovery of strike pilots by the U.S. Air Force "Jolly Greens". With limited mission helicopters and the limited rescue experience of the assigned pilots, only one mission and one set of tactics are practical. However, guerrilla warfare develops a myriad of SAR situations that do not fit any of the above missions. For example; who Medevacs an appendicitis patient off a troop ship? USAF trained pilots have never hoisted from a ship, USN aircraft do not have the range needed without a ship, USA aircraft do not have the navigation equipment. Or, who plans and conducts a search for a downed pilot in a secure but remote area? Or who tows the munitions barge when the tug breaks down? At present, there is nobody trained for them and no organization to coordinate the effort. Equipment that is developed for the special needs of combat could greatly simplify civilian SAR. How easy it would be to find a boat at night with a low light level television or an infrared side looking optic system. Even if the equipment were not directly available on rescue vehicles, rescue personnel would know the state of the art, and who to ask for it. On the other hand, it appears to me a legitimate peacetime rescue mission would help in justifying the cost of keeping a combat organization modern and ready. It took years to develop a modern rescue force in Vietnam even though we had an excellent organization in Korea.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I believe men and women who have chosen a career in rescue will do the best job. Helicopters and small boats are not a step down from fighters and ships of the line- they are another world unto themselves. In rescue, civilian or combat, there is not substitute for dedication and experience because by its very nature it cannot be reduced to a single solution. For those who have tasted a life saved and liked

it, nothing else is quite as satisfying to the palate. They will do their best job under the most conditions. I guess my real question is – is not there a place for the U.S. Coast Guard in limited warfare rescue or perhaps a national rescue force?

I hope I have made one thing very clear. America still produces the finest fighting men in the world and the Sandys and the Jolly Greens were the best of them.

Epilogue

After graduation from high school in Weston, MA in 1958, Jay received an appointment to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, New London, CT. Commissioned an Ensign in 1962, he served a tour at sea and then was assigned to naval flight training. Receiving his wings in 1965, he served at Coast Guard Air Stations San Francisco, CA. , Barbers Point, HI; Cape Cod, MA.; Annette Island AK and Sitka, AK.

He served during the Vietnam War on an exchange tour with the U.S. Air Force as a Combat Rescue Crew commander with the 37th ARRS Jolly Green Giants in Da Nang AB, RVN.

Jay was a 1981 graduate of the Air War College. He served as Commanding Officer Coast Guard Air Station Port Angeles WA. and Coast Guard Air Station Cape Cod MA. His final assignment before retirement was as Chief, Operations Division, 11th Coast Guard District, Long Beach, CA.

During Jay's distinguished career he was awarded a Legion of Merit, three Distinguished Flying Cross Medals, nine Air Medals, two Meritorious Service Medals. Three Coast Guard Commendation Medals, a Coast Guard Achievement Medal, and a Meritorious Unit Commendation.

Captain Crowe flew west crossing the bar February 22, 2003. His family was at his side.

With Deep Sincere Respect

John Moseley

CG Aviator #743
CGAA Historian

LCDR Joseph L. Crowe USCG