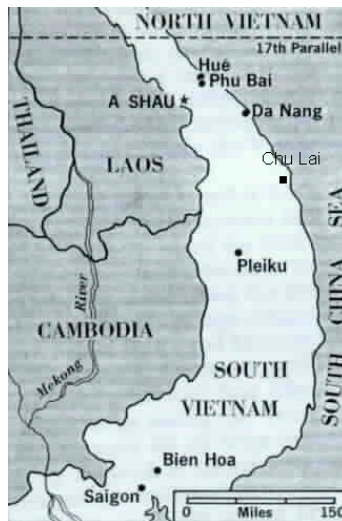


Below is the story of Jolly Green 23.

All times used are local time in Vietnam.

Sunday 9 June 1968 started off normally enough. "Crown 1" was the HC-130 SAR AMC for the day. It was loitering at the "Tango" orbit point high over the South China Sea. This "Hercules" was crewed by LtCol Knudson (P), Maj Caruana (AMC), Maj Parten (N), SSgt Davis (RO), TSgt Lee (FE) and SSgt Taylor (LM). All these men were assigned to the 39th ARRS.

At 9:26 a.m. "Cricket" called them on the radio. Cricket was an ABCCC C-130 who's mission was Airborne Battlefield Command and Control of air strikes attacking the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These ABCCC C-130's also used the callsigns "Alley Cat," "Hillsboro," and "Moonbeam." Cricket informed Crown that a USMC A-4 Skyhawk, call sign "Hellborne 215", had been shot down by ground fire at 220° for 37 miles off of the Hue Phu Bai TACAN. This location was on the Laos, South Vietnam border in the infamous A Shau Valley. The downed pilot had the misfortune of parachuting into a major NVA infiltration route, base area and strong point. Crown departed his feet wet orbit and headed at high altitude to a position near the objective area. From there, he would be able to better command and control all of the aircraft that would be involved in this mission.



Top 1/3 of map shows the area being described

The A-4 Skyhawk was a small single seat light attack jet flown by USN and USMC aviation units. A-4's were based at Chu Lai AB RVN and were assigned to Marine Air Group (MAG) 12. On June 9th these Marines were assigned targets in the A Shau Valley. The mission was interdicting enemy troops and material that were infiltrating from North Vietnam, through Laos, and into South Vietnam. The Skyhawk that had been shot down was flown by 1st Lt. Walter Schmidt. At 09:20, while making a bombing

attack on enemy forces, his aircraft was hit by ground fire and battle damage forced an immediate bailout.



A-4 Skyhawk

USMC Museum Photo



1st Lt. Walter Schmidt

The ejection was observed by his wingman Hellborne 552 who watched Schmidt's parachute open, descend safely to the ground, and get hung up in trees. Lt. Schmidt used his survival radio and told his wingman that he was directly under his parachute; but, his left arm and right leg were broken. He informed his wingman that he was unable to move from where he had landed. The wingman radioed Cricket, who in turn, radioed Crown.

The weather in the area was good and the downed pilot's parachute could easily be seen by overhead aircraft. It was hung up in trees in mountainous jungle terrain near a dirt road. The mountains in the area were about four thousand feet high. If the enemy knew where Lt. Schmidt was they could try to capture him, or use the injured pilot as a SAR trap and shoot down anyone trying to rescue him. A steep hill overlooked Lt. Schmidt's location; and, a deep ravine was just below him. The entire area was infested with entrenched hostile troops armed with various small arms. Several AAA sites were already firing at aircraft that remained in the area to protect the downed airman.

Lt. Schmidt's wingman switched his UHF radio to "guard" frequency to coordinate his teammates rescue. Guard frequency was 243.0 and it was installed in all of the handheld survival radios and beacons carried by aircrews in their survival gear. The Skyhawks orbiting over the downed airman talked amongst themselves about how they could best protect their teammate until rescue could arrive. These transmissions were overheard by other aircraft flying combat missions that day. Several of them spontaneously diverted to support the SAR. They included Cessna O-2 "Skymaster" FAC's (callsigns Trail and Covey) and two USMC Huey gunships (callsign "Scarface"). The O-2's included Trail 35, Trail 36, and Covey 265. Trail's were based at Hue and Covey's flew from DaNang. The FAC's were in contact with Crown 1 and Trail 36 was designated as on scene commander (OSC). Cricket notified Crown that they had several flights of fast movers that could be diverted to the SAR and six F-4's (Gunfighter's 01 thru 06) were soon overhead the survivor. Trail 36 began to direct

fighter strikes against the targets closest to the survivor. Those targets included .51 caliber guns, 23mm and 37mm antiaircraft artillery, bunkers, trucks and troops. The area was “hot” and this was clearly going to be a contested SAR. The OSC held the Huey gunships in reserve to escort the Jolly’s in for the pickup.

Maj Caruana, the Crown 1 AMC, knew that a fast SAR offered the best chance of rescuing of Lt. Schmidt. The longer the downed airman was on the ground, the more time the enemy would have to organize it’s resistance. The closest rescue aircraft were Jolly 07 & 29. They were already airborne for SAR on a downed F-105 (Master Lead) and orbiting feet wet off of Dong Hoi NVN. While waiting for a call to go in to pickup the F-105 pilot, an F-4 (Hudson 01) supporting that SAR was hit and it’s crew headed feet wet. Hudson 01 bailed out right over the orbit position of those Jolly’s. The Jolly’s watched two pilots eject and their parachutes open and land in the water. Jolly 07 landed on the water and taxied to recover both of them. Jolly 29 covered them as high bird. Clearly, Jolly Green’s 07 and 29 were already too busy and not available to go to the scene of Hellborne 215. Maj. Caruana decided to scramble the rescue aircraft on ground alert at DaNang. These included two HH-3E helicopters (Jolly 22 and 23) and two A-1’s (Spad 11 and 12) rescue escort (RESCORT).

At DaNang Air Base, the 37th ARRS aircrews were inside their operations building next to the flight line and within easy running distance to their aircraft. Before sunrise, they had received a combined intelligence / weather briefing and were given maps and code sheets. Then the crews picked up their survival gear that included flight helmets, gas masks, body armor, parachutes, water jug and survival vests. The last stop before heading out to their aircraft for the day was the armory; where they picked up and loaded their pistols and put them into holsters. Then the armorer gave each helicopter crewman a GUA/5 rifle and ammo for it in 20 or 30 round magazines. The alert PJs had inspected their medical and combat gear. All of this equipment was lugged out to their assigned aircraft and positioned for fast use. Maintenance troops had already inspected the aircraft to ensure that it was properly fueled, that aircraft weapons were installed, and that their bird was ready to fly. These support personnel took their work very seriously and had worked long hours the night before. They were keenly aware that mistakes on their part could cost lives; so they checked and then double checked everything that was humanly possible. When the aircrew arrived at the aircraft, the crew preflighted and configured it to allow them to get airborne in minimum time. Finally, everyone headed back to their respective work areas where they waited.

Being on ground SAR alert resulted in mixed emotions among the aircrews. The guys who had been in country for a few months and flown some combat SAR’s were generally relaxed. The new guys waited more nervously. The “newbee’s” knew they were well trained but had concerns about how they would perform in combat. Those readers who have never flown in combat would probably think the biggest fear would be of being killed. While that concern was certainly in the back of ones mind, the biggest fear of most air rescue men has was that of them letting down their fellow airmen by not doing their job when the “shit hit the fan.” At 09:25 a.m. the scramble klaxon sounded and whatever concerns each man had was replaced by adrenalin as they raced to their

aircraft. They quickly donned flight and survival gear, started engines and notified the tower that they were ready for takeoff. The airfield control tower immediately gave the rescue aircraft priority handling and cleared them to taxi and take off. It was always a race between the HH-3 Jolly Green helicopter crews and the A-1 Skyraider pilots to see who could get off first. The time from the scramble klaxon to takeoff rarely exceeded a few minutes.

Jolly 22 was low bird and Jolly 23 was their high bird. The Jolly 22 crew included Maj. Arthur J. Anderson (P), Capt. Joseph J. Dillon (CP), Sgt. Alvin A. Malone (FE), A1C Ricky D. Hindman (PJ), and SSgt P. E. Hagerty (AP). The Jolly 23 crew was Lt. Jack C. Rittichier (P), Capt. Richard C. Yeend (CP), SSgt Elmer L. Holden (FE), and Sgt. James D. Locher (PJ). Flight time from DaNang to the objective area was about one hour.

Enroute, the Jolly crews listened to the radio calls from the FACs and fighters over the survivor. One 37mm AAA site was destroyed just prior to the Jolly's arrived and were put into a holding point. Trail 36 notified the Jolly's that the survivor would need a PJ to deploy and recover him. Spad's 11 and 12 arrived on scene and added their firepower to the attacks. Numerous suppression strikes had been put into the area and no ground fire had come up during the last several passes by the A-1's. At 10:50 a.m. Trail 36 decided it was time to try a pickup and asked the Jolly's to attempt a rescue.

In hot temperatures and in the mountains, the H-3 was underpowered. All of Vietnam was hot and there were a lot of mountains in the country. Rescue H-3 crews needed to get rid of all excess weight to make pickups in high density altitudes. In the "jargon" of the crews, it was a "power limited" helicopter. The flight engineer used charts to calculate the power available and the power required to hover and make a pickup. To get its weight down, Jolly 22 jettisoned both external tip tanks and then dumped all excess internal fuel. They kept just enough fuel to make the pickup and make it to the nearest refueling point. Finally, Jolly Green 22's weight was correct and it's crew initiated a tactical approach to the survivor. This consisted of a very rapid descending 270° approach into the area in a spiraling right turn until the Jolly reached an altitude just above the jungle treetops. Flying fast as possible and just above the treetops was known as "flying on the deck."

Down on the deck, Jolly 22 joined up with two USMC Huey gunships. The survivor had a MK-13 smoke ready and would activate it when radioed to do so. The plan was for the Jolly to hover over Lt. Schmidt and lower its PJ (Ricky Hindman) to assist the injured airman on to the rescue hoist. While the Jolly was on approach to the survivor, all of the incoming helicopters received heavy ground fire. It was coming from multiple sites in the valley and on the surrounding ridges. The helicopters turned away from the survivor, checked aircraft systems, and then began a new approach from a different direction. As the Jolly slowed down to hover, it again came under intense ground fire. Airman Hindman and Sgt Malone (FE) returned fire with M-60 machineguns but the intensity of fire forced the Jolly pilot (Maj. Anderson) to abort the pickup and return to the orbit point.

Trail 36 immediately directed new suppression strikes into the areas from which the ground fire came that forced Jolly 22 to abort the pickup. After twenty minutes of attacks, the ground fire once again stopped. The question in the on scene commanders mind was had he destroyed the targets; or, were the NVA just holding fire and waiting for the easier targets that the Jolly's made. There was only one way to find out.

At 11:07, Jolly 22 made a second tactical approach to the treetops where he linked up with the two Scarface gunships and two Spad's for another rescue attempt. Again, just short of the downed pilot, heavy automatic weapons fire erupted from multiple positions around the survivor. The Jolly gunners returned fire with their M-60's and the Huey gunships and Spad's provided covering fire for the Jolly to withdraw to the safety of their orbit position. At 11:15, Jolly 22 had reached "bingo fuel" and needed to depart the area and refuel. Bingo fuel is the amount of fuel required to return to the nearest refueling base and still have thirty minutes of fuel remaining for flying after arriving at the refueling base.

Trail 36 asked if Jolly 23 could remain in the area for another pickup attempt. Jolly 23's pilot Lt. Jack C. Rittichier asked his crew what they thought. Capt. Richard C. Yeend (CP), SSgt Elmer L. Holden (FE), and Sgt. James D. Locher (PJ) were all willing to try. Lieutenant Rittichier radio they would try a pickup if the Scarface gunships would provide cover fire. At 11:19, JG 23 began its approach to the survivor. During the run in and approach to the survivor, Jolly 23 took ground fire; but, it's crew pressed on to Lt. Schmidt's location and entered into a hover. Because of the downed pilots injuries, pararescueman James Locker was on the hoist with his medical and combat gear. Sergeant Holden was operating the hoist and began to lower the PJ down to the ground. Captain Yeend radioed that Jolly 23 was taking heavy ground fire but it's crew remained in the hover. The A-1s and Huey gunships immediately returned fire and tried to get the enemy gunners focused on them and not the Jolly. A second FAC, flown by Lt. Col Robert C. Dubois, callsign Trail 33 intently watched all this hoping that this rescue attempt would be the one to succeed.

Lt. Col Dubois saw a small fire break out aft and above the pilots cabin of the Jolly. That is the area the engines are located. He immediate radioed Jolly 23 that it was on fire and to get out of there. Trail 33 also told the Jolly pilot that there was a clearing about a 1000 meters to the north. This was as bad as it could get for a Jolly crew. Lt. Rittichier radioed that he would try to get to the clearing. Before he left the hover, he had three tasks that required simultaneous completion. Get his PJ on the hoist clear of the trees, move his helicopter away from the survivor, and try to get enough forward speed so that his helicopter would be able to fly. If continued forward flight was impossible then he would try for the clearing. If the Jolly pilot started to leave with his PJ on the hoist and still in the trees, it would likely be fatal for the PJ. If he failed to move and crash landed on top of the survivor, it would likely be fatal for the survivor. Somehow, Lt. Rittichier managed to accomplish the first two tasks and was beginning the third. Tragically, Jolly Green 23 crashed about 1200 meters from the survivor.

Trail 33 later reported that it appeared to him that the Jolly pilot was attempting to land on a small knoll when the H-3 hit the ground and exploded in a fireball. Within thirty seconds the entire aircraft became nothing recognizable except for smoking ashes. The aircraft structure had completely melted out of sight. There were no signs of survivors from Jolly 23. No one had bailed out, there were no beepers heard. Because of the intense enemy presence in the area, no ground search was possible.