

Stormy 02 Bravo Rescue Mission – 18 January 1969

By Leland H. Sorensen

I was a pararescueman (PJ) assigned TDY to Udorn and had not been there a full four days when I was involved with my first real rescue mission on 18 January 1969. My permanent station was Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (NKP), where the previous month I had been involved (as a secondary crew only) with a rescue mission on 25 December 1968 wherein Pararescueman Charles Douglas King had been lost. Charlie had slept in the bunk beneath mine at NKP. Other than that, the mission on 18 January was my first.

Having been trained back in the United States on the HH-3E with its two M-60 machine guns, I was relatively new to the HH-53 and its three mini-guns. Therefore, it was decided that I would be PJ #1, and the other, more experienced PJ on the helicopter (Leon Fullwood), would be PJ #2. He would be positioned on the ramp mini-gun. I would be stationed on the left window mini-gun and go down the hoist to retrieve the wounded survivor.

As we flew just above treetop level to move into the location of the downed survivor, we could hear and “feel” ground-fire. The flight engineer yelled over the intercom that we were taking hits. The pilot asked where we were hit. I turned from my position at the window mini-gun to look around the helicopter interior. I could not see any damage. The flight engineer stated that he could not see any hits as we continued on into where the survivor was located.

As we neared the clearing where the survivor had landed, the flight engineer, who stood in the open doorway, started to lower the jungle-penetrator seat. When our pilot announced that we were over the survivor, I turned around toward the door to get onto the hoist. It was then that I observed that the jungle-penetrator seat was already headed for the ground. Therefore, I returned to my station at the window gun. The seat reached the ground, and the flight engineer said that the survivor was not getting onto it. The pilot asked about our sending down the PJ. I told him that I could go down.

As I stood in the door of the helicopter, I could see the explosions from the bombs being dropped to secure our perimeter. When the jungle seat was back up to the helicopter door, I got on it and was lowered to the ground. The survivor’s major injuries were a broken right arm and a broken left leg. He was still in his parachute harness, lying backwards on his seat kit. I used my knife to cut the straps and parachute lines to free him from his now inflated parachute, which blew off toward the tree line as I cut the last line caught on his foot. I placed an inflatable splint

on his broken right arm, placed two of the fold-down arms of the jungle-penetrator seat up next to his seat kit, sat him up, and slid him onto the jungle seat. I placed a safety strap around his ribcage. I sat on the third arm of the jungle seat and signaled the flight engineer to hoist us up to the helicopter. I decided that his broken left leg could hang as he sat on the seat. This actually worked quite well until we were at the door of the helicopter.

At the door, the flight engineer pulled me backward into the helicopter door. This created a slight dilemma for my patient, since he was facing the helicopter in this position. After giving it some brief consideration, I decided that all I could do was rotate him around with the jungle-penetrator seat between us and lay him on the floor of the helicopter. This, of course, caused him no little discomfort to his broken leg. We decided to just leave him there on the floor for the flight to NKP. I gave him a shot of morphine, and we tried to make him comfortable.

After completing my 12-month tour in Thailand on 28 Nov 1969, I was sent to the Philippine Islands and stationed at Clark Air Base. It was there that I was awarded the Silver Star for my actions on 18 January 1969.

It was not until April 2002 that I was informed of the survivor's name—James Fegan. On 30 May 2002, we met (for a second time) at Dayton, Ohio, at a Combat Search and Rescue Society debriefing of the *Stormy 02 Bravo* mission. Today he is a medical doctor. He came to the debriefing with a video of combat footage, which I had never seen—taken that day by the photographer onboard our helicopter. Jim went down at about 1400 hours on 17 January 1969 near Tchepone, Laos. Due to the many enemy guns in the area (guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail), it was not possible to rescue him until the next morning. His F-4 had taken hits, and a wing exploded. He remembered reaching for some maps to determine their location, and then waking up to find himself lying on the ground in a parachute. He received his injuries (bones broken in 11 places) when he was ejected at about 500 mph. Following his rescue, he spent many months in rehabilitation. Today he walks with a slight limp. His front-seater, Victor Arlon Smith, was never found and probably went into the ground still in his ejection seat.

Second Revision of this story by Leland Sorenson

18 January 1969

By Leland H Sorensen

Written 20 April 2002

I was a pararescueman assigned TDY to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (stayed at Udorn Hotel). My permanent station was Nakhon Phanom RTAFB. I had left the United States at the end of November 1968, had gone to NKP, then to Clark Air Base in the Philippines for Jungle Survival School (7Dec68 to 18Dec68), back to NKP, and had then been assigned TDY to Udorn RTAFB (14Jan69 to 22Feb69). I had been involved (as a secondary crew) with the mission of 25 December 1968 wherein Charles D. King had been lost. Other than that, the mission on 18 Jan 69 was my first.

Having been trained back in the United States on the HH-3E, I was relatively new to the HH-53. It was, therefore, decided that I would be PJ#1 and the other, more experienced PJ on the crew would be PJ#2. He would have been more familiar with the mini-gun. The crew of Jolly Green 68 consisted of Kenneth Earnest (AC), Arthur Smith (CP), Howard Lord (FE), Leland Sorensen (PJ#1), Leon Fullwood (PJ#2), and Alfred Magill (Photog).

As we flew just above tree top level to move into the location of the downed survivor, we could hear and “feel” ground-fire. The flight engineer excitedly announced that we were taking hits. The pilot asked where we were hit. I turned from my station at the window mini-gun to look around the helicopter interior. I could not see any damage. To this day, I am not aware that our helicopter took any battle damage.

As we neared the clearing where the downed survivor was located, the flight engineer, who stood in the open doorway, started to lower the jungle-penetrator seat. When our pilot announced that we were over the survivor, I turned around toward the door to get on the hoist. It was then that I observed that the seat was halfway down to the ground. I, therefore, returned to my station at the window gun. The seat reached the ground and the flight engineer said that the survivor was not getting on the seat. The pilot asked about our sending down the PJ. I thought that was the plan all along.

When the jungle seat was back up to the helicopter door, I got on it and was lowered to the ground. The survivor had a broken arm and a broken leg. He was still in his parachute harness, leaning backwards on his seat kit. I used my knife to cut the straps and free him from his parachute, which blew off toward the jungle, having inflated in the rotor-wash. I placed an inflatable splint on his broken right arm, placed two of the fold-down arms of the jungle penetrator seat up next to his seat kit, sat him up, and slid him onto the penetrator. I placed a safety strap around his ribcage; I sat on the third arm of the penetrator seat and signaled the flight engineer to hoist us up to the helicopter.

At the door, the flight engineer pulled me backward into the helicopter door. This created a slight dilemma for my patient. He was facing the helicopter in this position. After giving it some brief consideration, I decided that all I could do was rotate him around and lay him on the floor of the helicopter. This, of course, caused him no little discomfort to his broken leg. We decided to just leave him there on the floor for the flight to NKP. I gave him some morphine and tried to make him comfortable.



Leland Sorensen on 01-18-69



Sorensen receives Silver Star