

## **The FUBAR SAR**

**File name: 73-7 Helm-2**

**Ned Helm**

**Rustic-15**

*Location: North of Phnom Penh between the Tonle Sap River and Route 26*

*Date: June '73, Time of Day: Middle afternoon*

**I had just crossed the “fence” southbound from Ubon to the Kampong Thom (Tom) area in North central Cambodia where I was fragged to support ‘Sam the FAC’, a Khmer ground commander.**

**I was at somewhere around 8,500 feet MSL and it was an awesome day. Radio Australia was playing soft rock and puffy cumulous clouds were everywhere, so I was playing with them! Zooming in and out of puffy canyons and arcing over the tops, rolling inverted and pulling into the next soft white valley.**

**I was absolutely reveling in the fact that I was a fully combat qualified Rustic FAC.... I was allowed to ply my trade without any ‘adult supervision’. It was one of the most intoxicating power trips on earth. As a Rustic FAC you controlled the air war in Cambodia. It was like being the ringmaster of a pyrotechnic circus. You simply pointed at something and it went away. *The responsibility that went with being a FAC would never be approached... EVER... during my years in the Air force, no matter what I flew or what I did!***

My cavorting with the puffys was brought to a screeching halt by a call from the ABCCC (Airborne Command and Control Center - call sign Cricket)

*“Rustic 15, Say position!”*

*“Roger Crick, I’m over the karst north of Thom. What can I do for you?”*

*“15, have you been monitoring Guard?”*

*“Uh.. No.”* (I mean, how can one enjoy Radio Australia and Guard channel?)

I immediately moved my UHF receiver selector to BOTH and was greeted by the bone-chilling screech of a Beeper (Personnel Locator Beacon).

*“One five, this is Cricket, you are to proceed to the 350/20 off of PapaPapa. We have an Aardvark, call sign Whaler 02 down. What is your ETA to the scene?”*

*“Ah.. Cricket this is One Five, you might want to assign an old head, I’m an FNG.”*

*“Negative one five you are ‘IT’. There are no other FACs as close as you are. We’re designating you the “On-Scene Commander.”*

Well shit! Adrenalin surged through my body; I wrenched my OV around to the southwest and pushed up both power levers to the wall!

*“One five, contact King on button 12.”*

After getting my heart rate back down into the stratosphere, a huge grin broke out on my face. A SAR! Every FAC I knew wanted to be the on-scene commander for a successful SAR. There could be no more satisfying mission than being the On-Scene Commander when a fellow aircrew member was snatched from the waiting hands of the Khmer Rouge.

King, the HC-130, Rescue Coordination bird designated me the ‘On-scene commander’, and advised that the alert Jolly Green rescue helicopters were already airborne for their afternoon stroll around northern Cambodia (they sat alert until mid-afternoon and then launched and flew south of “the fence” in an east west route north of the Tonle Sap and then returned to base at Ubon) and that the A-7 Sandys from Korat were scrambling.

I pulled out my SAR checklist and then tried to get some more definitive location and nature of the “shoot down” from King. They didn’t have much.

For the life of me I couldn’t figure out how an F-111 on a straight and level beacon-bombing mission (at a zillion feet in the air) could get hit by anything in 1973 Cambodia. There was significant small arms fire and .51 cal, but SA-7s were rare and anything bigger was unknown, except east of the Mekong River.

As I hurried the 50 or so miles towards the area northwest of PP (Phnom Penh), I continued to home on the beeper and scan the supposed area of the punch out. Remember, the F-111 has a “capsule” which blows the whole cockpit, complete with canopies, out of the aircraft. I figured that an Aardvark (F-111) would make a prodigious hole in the ground and the capsule with its chutes should be easy to find. I also climbed up to around 10,000 feet AGL (Astro FAC!) just in case something

nasty had downed the F-111. After all, they bombed from well above the altitudes at which we routinely flew. If it hit them going 450 knots, it was going to “eat my shorts.” Whatever had hit him had to be big! Little did I know, it was very “BIG.”

Needless to say the whole air war came to a stop for a SAR, and I was the “Belle-of-the-Ball.” I had so many sets of fighters overhead it was kind of like a horde of flies circling a moving road kill (me!). After a bit, I sorted out who was who and had them, “*Hold high and dry but follow me. Work it out among yourselves as to who goes to the tank first-I want air overhead at ALL times!*”

Then I requested that King assign a High FAC to prep and brief them so that all I would have to do was put them in as required.

Nail/Rustic common (Fox Mike) was abuzz with guys offering assistance, advice and one soul even offered condolences. I thought I recognized the voice of Mike Ballard, Rustic 16, my IP during my check out.

It was one of the most hectic but satisfying moments of my life. No matter how many times we heard, “*When someone goes down WE WILL GET HIM OUT.*” It was hard to believe, but it was true, and I was going to do it.

I crossed the Tonle Sap River and started looking for anything that looked like a downed aircraft and/or a capsule. The crew had finally turned off their beeper(s) and in response to my, “Beeper, beeper, come up voice,” they came up on 243.0 megacycles and I sent them to the secondary frequency.

**They had landed upside down tangled in their shroud lines in the middle of a field surrounded on four sides by trees. They had then boogied into the trees to the south and now were ‘lost.’ As I looked down, there were about a zillion tree lines and fields stretching as far as the eye could see. So I went to Plan B.**

***“Whaler, give me a hold down.”***

***“Roger 15, transmitting, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 ...”***

**The ADF needle swung in lazy circles. Either: A) I was overhead, or B) the damn thing was broken. (I voted for B).**

**Those of you who have had the dubious pleasure of trying to see anything from 10,000 feet AGL will understand that I was on the horns of a dilemma. I could not do my job from way up here, but I could not do any good way down there.... if I was dead!**

***“Whaler, what shot you down?”***

***“Ahhh... well.... We ran into another F-111.”***

***“Whaler, say again!”***

***“One five, we ran into another F-111 and lost most of our left wing, lost control and had to punch out.***

***“Roger. Sit down, drink some water, and STAY PUT. We’ll get you out,”***

Well, that means it wasn't a SAM, or radar 57mm, or anything else that goes bang in the sky.

***YAA HOO!***

I rolled the OV over on her back and pulled gently through in a split-S. I watched the checker board of rice paddies get MUCH bigger before I pulled out at a much better altitude to look at the ground---say around 1,500 feet AGL---and for a few moments I was going at "*the speed of heat.*" If anybody down there was shooting at me they were not using enough lead---I had over 300 knots---I never went that fast in an OV again until I became an FCF pilot later that summer.

***"One five, we hear your engine-you are fading and going south."***

I was going east...things were not going well.

***"Rustic One five, this is King?"***

***"Go Ahead King."***

***"Jolly 21 flight of two are approaching your area, and Sandy 01 flight is crossing the fence at this time-meet them on Fox Mike."***

***"Negative King. I'm a little busy here trying to locate the survivors. Tell them to continue inbound and talk to the high FAC who will brief them. Also move the tanker(s) a bit further south to help out the fighters."***

**If Whaler had heard an aircraft, then let's find the aircraft.**

**After frantically searching the sky, I finally saw two Khmer AT-28s orbiting a mile or two to the east very low. Obviously, the artificially high minimum altitudes dictated by our Higher Headquarters did not burden them. It was their country and they**

**flew where they jolly well wanted.**

**After a hurried look through one of my checklists, (which my IP had made me make --- good on him!), I came up with the frequency for Scorpion Ops (the Khmer fighter squadron at Phnom Penh, commanded by Maj Kohn Om) and gave them a call (on VHF, I think). They said they (the Scorpion AT- 28s) had seen the capsule during its descent and were overhead. I flew over to their orbit and called the survivors.**

***“Whaler, do you have me in sight? I'm making smoke.”***

**I reached over my head to the panel above the gun sight, and flipped up the smoke generator switch. This pumped oil into the turbine section of # 2 engine and made white smoke trail my aircraft.**

***“Roger that – you're a T-28.”***

***“Negative, I am an Oscar Victor One Zero.”***

*“No Joy, One five.”*

**I made repeated low passes over the area and lo and behold, in the middle of a rice paddy was a mess of maps, canopy, shroud lines and what for all the world looked like a camouflaged, crushed, Dempsey dumpster. It was the F-111 “capsule.”  
Eureka!**

*“Hey FAC, we have you now.”*

*“Roger Whaler! Where are you from the capsule?”*

*“We are in the tree line due south of the capsule and we hear voices-I think we are about to have company.”*

*“Stay put. We have enough air up here to level the entire province. I see no activity except farmers in the field to the south of you.”*

**Hmm...farmers? Not bloody likely! This area was a Khmer Rouge area and that’s why the Whalers were “sky puking” MK 82 bombs all over the place.**

**So... I went to take a look. They were farmers. No kidding.**

**At least they were not hosing my OV, which was, slightly below the minimum altitude that Buffalo Chip (Blue Chip: Seventh Air Force Headquarters) dictated that we fly above. They were walking along the path with a couple of Buffies**



(carabao) near the next rice paddy to the south of the tree line where Whaler was hiding, no threat there. They, the Khmer farmers, had no idea about how close they were to becoming cosmic goo.

They waived and ducked. Did I mention that I was slightly below the recommended (or is that dictated) altitude? If the OV had been a Harley, I would have had bugs in my teeth.

So, now we have the survivors located, Jolly Greens are en route, the Sandy A-7s (fully SAR trained fighter jocks, who were the replacement for the lost and lamented A-1s) en route, and a “cold” landing zone. This will be a piece of cake.

I had given the high FAC, a Nail (whose name or number has been lost in the mists of time) the coordinates of the capsule (KACed up-encoded)

He relayed them to King, and therefore, the whole world, that we had two healthy, if somewhat nervous, Aardvark drivers standing (crouching?) on Khmer soil.

*(This was, needless to say, in violation of the Cooper-Church amendment, which forbade US servicemen from setting foot in Cambodia...a pox on both of those gentlemen! Perhaps we should give them an all-expenses junket to the killing fields!)*

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You could almost hear the sighs of relief from Buffalo Chip without a radio.

Now all we had to do was vector the Jolly Greens to the survivors and “by-lao” back to the bar for a whiskey.

Well, no one said this was going to be easy. *The Jolly Greens were lost!* They had gone to the coordinates given to them by King (someone...hopefully not me... had transposed a number in the UTM map coordinate and they were now in the middle of the Tonle Sap (a GIANT lake complete with crocodiles!), about 50 miles to the north.

And, about that time, Sandy, a flight of four A-7s, arrived, streaking into the area, looking for a fight. I briefed Sandy lead and turned over “On-Scene Commander” to him, held to the west and waited for the Jolly Greens, of course, monitoring the whole thing on all five radios. (*How did we ever do that?*)

Sandy was trying to sort out the Jolly Greens, who now allowed as how that, with all the dicking around over the Tonle Sap, they were “skosh” on fuel, but were in-bound. (*Jollys would prefer to roll inverted into hell before they would abort a SAR. My kind of people!*)

About this time one of the Sandys announced that he was,

*“In on gomers to the south.”*

Those poor farmers were about to get CBU 52 and 20 mike mike all over them.

I flipped over to Guard and screamed,

*“Sandy, Sandy, this is Rustic One five, abort your run those are friendlies.”*

**At the same time, I did a great impression of the secret service agent jumping in front of the President: I put my OV in front of the A-7. (Do you have any idea how big the air intake under the nose of an A-7 looks when viewed from underneath and in front at around ...no feet?)**

***“Roger One five.”***

**The A-7 pulled off dry (...and missed me).**

**Relative calm returned until I noticed two helos low over the field where the capsule was, and they were not HH-53s!!**

**Sandy Lead began to lose his composure at this point (Hell, I had lost mine at least an hour before!)**

**After a low pass, I determined that the helos were Khmer Hueys (Call sign Red Eagle) from PP that had been launched, probably by Major Kohn, or Papa Wolf, Lt Col Mark Berent, the Air Attaché.**

**I had no contact with them but it was obvious to anyone who had a clue, that they were trying to pick up Whaler Alpha and Bravo.**

Sandy Lead was trying to make sense out of what was rapidly turning into an aerial Chinese fire drill and his number two was advocating forcing the helo's out of the area.

**THAT DID IT!**

*“Sandy Lead this is Rustic One five, I am reassuming “On-scene commander” at this time! We have indigenous (one was not allowed to admit that the Khmers had an Air Force) choppers trying to effect a pickup! Let me assist them, and get it done.”*

After a brief but pregnant pause,

*“Roger Rustic One five, you have it.”*

The rookie had just called off the expert. At the time it never entered my mind that I was doing something that was...shall we say...NOT DONE!

*“Whaler, this is One five, do you have the Hueys in sight?”*

*“That is affirmative, we're chasing them.”*

*“Say again, Whaler?”*

*“They keep moving from paddy to paddy and we keep chasing after them.”* They were now obviously breathless.

The pair of Khmer Hueys were going from clearing to clearing, looking for the survivors and, like a great PIO (pilot induced oscillation) Whaler Alpha and Bravo were always one gyration (rice paddy) behind them. *(Whaler Alpha and Bravo were violating one of the cardinal rules of Search and Rescue. STAY PUT unless your life is in danger or you are directed to move. They were running through the trees and rice patties trying to catch a helicopter going 100 knots.)*

I was beside myself with rage...both at myself for trusting someone else who I thought had more experience than I had... and at the survivors, who were acting like idiots.

After a brief caustic discussion with the high FAC (a rowdy Nail from NKP), I decided to do.... nothing, which proved to be a good call.

About this time the Red Eagles lifted off from the field where the wreckage of the capsule was located and bee-lined for PP.

Well, about time, I thought!

I made a call to PP (either to Papa Wolf's frequency, or to Scorpion Ops) to confirm that the survivors were in fact aboard one of the Hueys. They talked with the Red Eagles and the response was,

*"That is affirmative, they have two souls on board."*

*"King, King, this is Rustic One five."*

***“Go ahead, One five.”***

***“Both Whaler Alpha and Bravo are on board an indigenous Huey and are en route to Phnom Penh.”***

***“Sierra Hotel, One five.”***

**The Rustic and the Nail escorted the Hueys as they “WHOP WHOPPED” towards Phnom Penh.**

**The whole SAR force sort of collapsed into relief and started returning to base or scrambling for tankers, when King in obvious (at least to them) concern asked,**

***“One five, are you sure that Whaler Alpha and Bravo are on the Hueys?”***

**Hmm...he had a point. They (Whaler Alpha and Bravo), never did say,**

***“Hey FAC, we are getting on the chopper, have a nice day and we’ll see you at the bar.”***

**Perhaps the Red Eagles had just tired of the “goat rope” and decided to go to PP for “monkey balls and rice.”**

**I flew up next to the trailing Red Eagle and peeked into the interior with my binocs...nope, not there. Next, I flew up to the lead ship and lo and behold, there**

were two guys in flight suits waving like idiots. Yup, they looked like happy anteaters to me.

*“King they appear to be in the lead Huey.”*

*“Roger One five, please confirm that the aircrew is on the lead Huey.”*

I called the Hueys on their frequency, which the Scorpions had just given me on VHF.

Knowing that most Khmer aviators did not speak English but were fluent in French, I attempted,

*“Attention! Est-ce-que vous avez les pilotes American dans votre helicoptere? (Not bad for college French, eh!)*

In sarcastic American-accented English, the pilot responded that he did, in fact, have them. Still not convinced (after all how does one walk into Ye Olde Rustic Inne feeling the warm afterglow of an awesome mission only to discover that the survivors are still eating ants in Cambodia!), I replied in now famous words,

*“Tell them to walk to the door and do something American.”*

After a short delay, both Aardvark drivers appeared in the door and they both... shot me the bird!

When I regained my composure, stopped laughing, and I do mean laughing, ...with tears streaming down my face,... I called,

*“King, King, the survivors are definitely on board the lead Huey.”*

We daisy chained around the Hueys, and looped and rolled too, until they landed on the military ramp at Papa Papa and then I did an impromptu low pass with the requisite victory roll (the devil made me do it, sir!) complete with smoke generator trail!!!

After checking in with Cricket, I was advised to return to base. No matter how hard I pleaded they would not let me land at PP to see the guys we had helped.

I was close to bingo, so I turned north for the Thai border, and for the only mission of the 97 I was to fly in Cambodia, I returned home with all of my ordnance. I had never fired a shot, never got shot at, and yet, God, did I feel good!

The puffy Q's were still there and I played with them, zooming down the fluffy canyons and pulling up and rolling inverted over soft mesas. I was in love, with the OV-10, with Willie Petes, with a job well done. (Well.... at least done.)

In the background on Radio Australia, the Carpenters crooned, *I'm on top of the world ...*and the OV moved with the music.

Cricket passed me off to King , who it seemed, wanted a word. Oh hell, I thought, here comes the critique for the FUBAR SAR.

*“One five, this is King.”*



*“Roger, go ahead King.”*

*“Nice job, One five, not bad... for an FNG.”*

**I never replied. I didn't know what to say. I just clicked the mike button twice, the non-verbal response that means “message received”**

**... I KNEW that when, or if, the day came, someone else would feel as proud as I did, when they scarfed me out of the jungle.**

**As I neared the limestone escarpment that marked the Thai/Khmer border (“the fence”), I paused in my games with the clouds when a sparkle caught my eye. It was another OV heading south to Kampong Thom and he was moving with the music and playing with the**

**clouds.**

**The Carpenters continued to play on Radio Australia....**

*...I'm on top of the world, Looking down on creation....*

Postscript.....I never got to have a drink to enjoy my good day....nor did I want one...when I got back to Ubon I found out that one of our hooch mates...a 336th TFS Wolf FAC named Sam Cornelius and his WSO John Blackburn had gone down in in Freedom Deal. I had played 456 with Sam a couple of nights before....now he was gone....my bubble burst.....

Their SAR was not successfull....they were the LAST aircrew to die in SEA, until the Mayaguez