

MISSION OVER LAOS

By Jim Richmond

In 1970 I was a Forward Air Controller (FAC) flying the OV-10 Bronco with the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron out of Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base in northeastern Thailand. I had arrived at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) in early January, and not too long after my combat checkout I was occasionally assigned temporary duty at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base to do visual reconnaissance and direct air strikes in central Laos. My call sign was Nail 37.



OV-10 Bronco Forward Air Control Aircraft

On Saturday, March 21st, 1970, my mission was visual reconnaissance on the Plain of Jars and post strike reconnaissance following a planned air strike on Route 7 east of the Plain of Jars. The briefing for the mission was short, and I was able to take off a little earlier than my 1000 hours scheduled takeoff time. I arrived in the assigned work area to find it covered by a layer of haze that restricted visibility to less than 5 miles. Building clouds further hampered the assigned visual reconnaissance mission. I was still able to accomplish all the requested work over the Plain of Jars well before the scheduled air strike and decided to check on activity along Route 7. Route 7 was the road leading from the Northeast corner of the Plain of Jars into North Vietnam, and was the primary road the North Vietnamese used to bring supplies into the Plain of Jars to support the war in Laos. The air strike I was assigned post strike reconnaissance for was to be along Route 7, so I flew over the area where the air strike was to occur and made a quick check on the weather there for the airborne command post. I then continued further out Route 7 to continue with visual reconnaissance. After looking over the area around Ban Ban, an intersection where there was considerable enemy activity, I decided to go out Route 7 as far as the Bird's Head. The Bird's Head was a large turn in the road that, from the air, formed the outline of a bird's head and, like many other visual landmarks, was well-known. There were a few signs of recent human activity along the road, which I noted on my maps. On reaching the Bird's Head, about 5 miles from the North Vietnam border, I turned and headed back toward Ban Ban. A few miles west of the Bird's Head, I noticed what appeared to be a large garden - an almost sure sign of a bivouac area. I flew on past it a short distance, then returned for another look so I could check it out and plot its exact location.

I had just made a notation on my map of the garden's location and checked the altimeter at 8300 feet as I was climbing back up to my 8500 foot working altitude after

having gotten down to about 8000 feet. As I was starting a shallow left turn toward the west an explosion rocked my airplane. Out of my peripheral vision I had seen the explosion on my left wing outboard of the engine. Although I had tried to mentally prepare for the possibility of being hit by ground fire, it was still a big shock to realize that I had been hit by anti-aircraft fire! The force of the explosion threw the airplane into a right bank. I abruptly corrected for the roll, and the airplane rolled rapidly back into a steep left bank and fell into a dive. I was able to get the aircraft upright, but the airplane was seriously crippled. I switched to the emergency Guard channel on my radio and made a Mayday call, telling the airborne command post that I had been hit. As I was struggling to maintain control, I saw flames spilling off the top of the left wing and streaming back as far as I could see. The presence of a serious fire meant I didn't have any real hope of making it back to safety, and the possibility of an explosion loomed. I decided to eject from the airplane. I made a call on the radio telling the airborne command post that I was going to eject, and I remember the command post asking me where I was. Asking my location was a question that I surely didn't have the time to answer, at least not like a FAC would answer that kind of a question with map coordinates. Struggling with a mortally wounded airplane, I didn't have time to figure out coordinates. At that time all I could think about was what I was about to do - eject from my burning airplane - so I didn't answer. Moments later I was to wish that I had at least told the command post that I was on Route 7 East of Ban Ban.

With little more than a moment's further hesitation and having gotten the airplane pretty much upright, I reached down between my knees and pulled the D-ring ejection handle. Immediately the cockpit was filled with the exhaust flames and smoke of the rocket ejection motor, and there was a sudden, smooth acceleration of the seat upward as it burst through the canopy. I was momentarily aware of going through the canopy, but the next thing I was aware of was being suspended beneath my parachute. The ejection had been very fast and not at all unpleasant, but now I was hanging in the parachute with the suspension lines so twisted over my head that it was difficult to raise my head. By kicking I was able to start spinning to untwist the parachute risers, and soon I could look up and see the bright orange and white canopy blossomed above me.

The sight of the fully open parachute was a comforting sight, but my feeling of well-being was immediately erased by the realization that enemy gunners on the ground were shooting at me as I was descending to the earth! I felt like a sitting duck. I began to pull as hard as I could on the parachute risers to make the parachute slip and move away from where the shooting seemed to be coming, but I achieved hardly any horizontal speed at all. I felt almost frozen in space as the bullets whizzed by. But the earth was also coming up quickly and I had to turn my attention to my impending landing. I had had jump training and had learned to maneuver a parachute. That training came in handy that day as I maneuvered my parachute enough to pick a tree in which to land. The tree appeared to be a better landing site than the uneven, rocky hillside below. Crashing through the tree's branches, I came to a stop about 20 feet or so above the ground near the lowest branches on the tree. With the parachute firmly hung up in the tree, I swung over to the trunk of the tree and stood up on one of the lower limbs. Now my problem was how to get down!

I knew that I had very little time before those who had been shooting at me on my way down would be up to claim their prize, so getting down from the tree could not be delayed. The Air Force had planned for the problem of getting down from a tree after an ejection in the jungles of Southeast Asia and had attached tree-lowering devices to all parachute harnesses for just this eventuality. I hooked up the tree-lowering device just as practiced in survival school and stepped off the limb, but nothing happened. I got back on the limb, pulled some of the nylon strapping through the device and stepped off the limb once again. This time I rapidly descended all of about six inches! Climbing back up on the limb, I decided the time was too short to troubleshoot the tree lowering device, so I took off the parachute harness, hugged the tree trunk and shinnied down the tree to the ground.

Hitting the ground pretty hard, I twisted my knee, but was otherwise unhurt. Though relieved to be on the ground, now was no time to be hanging around this area with the brightly colored parachute draped over the canopy of the tree marking the spot where I had landed. This was just what the enemy would be looking for. I looked over my survival equipment, and decided that carrying things would not be a good idea, so I left the seat survival kit and started up the ridgeline away from the nearest enemy camp with only my helmet and survival vest.

It wasn't long before there was gunfire behind me coming from the vicinity of my abandoned parachute. I estimated that I had probably traveled only about 100 yards or so from the parachute. Now it was really time to panic! I quickly looked for hiding places and selected a small stand of bamboo. There were some places nearby that looked much better for hiding, but time didn't permit being too choosy. The small bamboo stand was the nearest suitable hiding place, and at that time, all I wanted to do was get out of sight as quickly as possible. The stand was so small that I couldn't even get fully into the bamboo, and my head remained out of the bamboo as I slid down into the stand of bamboo on my back. As soon as I got into my hiding place, I took off my wedding ring and buried it next to one of the bamboo shoots. We had been told that Vietnamese captors would use something like that against one psychologically, and I didn't want to give them that opportunity if captured.

Within seconds of finding my parachute, the search party that had been sent to capture me had fanned out to find me. Shortly after getting into my hiding place I saw a soldier searching in the small ravine below me and heard several others nearby. It also sounded like another soldier walking up the ridgeline behind me. I wanted to see what was happening behind me, but I knew I was visible, and knew that any movement might attract unwanted attention. I hoped that if I kept still, I wouldn't be seen. It was agony knowing that whoever it was on the ridgeline behind me could easily see me, and that my first real knowledge of being found might be the hot muzzle of an AK-47. I couldn't understand their language and was not about to respond to any shouts. After all, there were shouts all around me as the soldiers yelled to one another. I listened for any sound of excitement in their voices that could be the telltale sign that I had been found, but fortunately that never occurred. The soldier in the gully in front of me searched the hiding place that I had first had wanted to use. The soldiers occasionally fired their weapons into the air, trying to frighten me, I suppose. Lying on my back looking up into

the bamboo, I noticed the shoots of bamboo were riddled with bullet holes. That wasn't too comforting, but at least the bullet holes weren't fresh. After the first soldier had looked for me in the ravine, he turned back toward the sound of the other voices, and soon a patrol of half a dozen or so soldiers came up the ravine to look for me. They passed near my position – I would judge no more than fifty feet in front of me, and at one time, the leader even turned and looked in my direction. My heart almost stopped, but he didn't see me. I had camouflaged myself as much as possible by putting some fallen leaves over my head. It was a pathetic job of camouflage, but it worked, much to my relief. Although my small stand of bamboo had at first seemed like a poor place to hide, that day I learned that what doesn't look like a good place to hide also doesn't attract too much attention.

After about 45 minutes, an American fighter (an F-4) airplane, Laredo 01, arrived overhead trying to locate me. By this time the enemy search party was moving back to the vicinity of my parachute. Holding my emergency radio to my ear, I heard Laredo 01 say that if I were okay to turn my beeper on for 5 seconds. I turned on my locator beeper for 5 seconds, transmitting a signal to the search aircraft on an emergency frequency. I then listened for a response but heard none, so I turned my beeper on for another 5 seconds.



F-4C Phantom

This time the fighter pilot heard my beeper and was near enough that I could talk on the radio without too much fear of being heard. Until the arrival of the F-4, I had felt that the Pathet Lao search party looking for me could almost hear me breathing!



A-1H Skyraider

Now with the noise of the American airplane overhead, there was background noise, and I cautiously made voice transmissions on the radio. I had just begun to give the F-4 pilot instructions on my location when an A-1 flew directly over my position. I called out on the radio that there was an A-1 directly overhead, and the A-1 pilot pulled his aircraft around sharply and found my parachute on his next pass. I felt a great relief in having been found, but now had to tend to the business of giving the attack aircraft instructions for dropping their

ordnance to force the enemy to pull back from my position so a rescue helicopter could come in and get me out.

The A-1 flight, Firefly 40 and 41, had ordnance to start "sanitizing" the area so a helicopter could come in and pick me up without too much risk of being shot down in the process. What I didn't know at the time was that the Air Force rescue helicopters had been alerted and were in the air but were holding near the Mekong River because the area where I had been shot down was too "hot". Only a couple of weeks before, a helicopter had rushed in to pull out a crew that had been shot down and the helicopter was also shot down. When the Jolly Green crew was satisfied that enemy activity in the area was adequately neutralized, they would come pick me up.

Since the fighters had my parachute in sight, I was able to direct most of the airstrike using my emergency radio. My bright orange and white parachute draped over the tree was now an asset since it could be used as a marker about which to drop ordnance and strafe. Firefly 40 and 41 dropped ordnance close enough that leaves were falling from the trees from the force of the concussions. They dropped and strafed for about 20 minutes before they ran out of ordnance and had to leave. I was told that another flight would be arriving soon. Meanwhile, the F-4 pilot that was now overhead said he would make a few strafing passes to keep the enemy backed away from my position. That wasn't what I wanted to hear, because I had seen some poor strafing from F-4s where the pilot hadn't hit even reasonably close to his target. I cautioned the F-4 pilot and reminded him where I was, however, the pilot did an excellent job. Soon the next flight of A-1s was overhead. Again I directed much of the airstrike, but Raven 41, a Raven FAC flying an O-1, had arrived and assisted in directing the strike. Raven 41's part in my rescue was crucial, because he called Air America and arranged for their helicopters to pick me up.



O-1 Bird Dog flown by Raven FACs

The next flight of attack aircraft was Sandy flight, a flight of two more A-1 aircraft. Again, I had them work around my parachute to try to force any remaining enemy back toward their base camp near Route 7. All too soon they informed me they were running low on ordnance, and I still hadn't heard anything about the rescue helicopters. Then the Raven FAC called to tell me there were two Air America helicopters on scene. He asked how I was, because he wanted me to move from my hiding place and cross the ridgeline to a safer place for the unarmed helicopter to make a pick-up. To cross the ridgeline where I was hiding would expose the helicopters to antiaircraft and automatic weapons fire from the enemy base camp near Route 7. I wasn't ready to move, thinking it was too soon because I felt the enemy activity had not been adequately neutralized. However, the FAC told me that I would have to make my move now. There were no

more attack aircraft available, and the helicopters didn't have fuel to loiter much longer. Ready or not, I had to move. I asked the Sandy flight to strafe diagonally across the ridgeline, using my parachute as a reference to avoid hitting me as I moved across the same ridgeline. Before leaving my hiding place, I dug my wedding ring up and put it back on.

Cover on the ridgeline was surprisingly sparse. This wasn't what I thought of as a real jungle. It was the end of the dry season, and a fire had burned much of the grass. I ran from tree to tree, for cover in case the enemy should see me. However, the A-1's strafing probably kept them occupied with concern for their own well-being. Reaching the top of the ridgeline, I was relieved to see grass about two feet tall on the other side of the ridge. I sat down in the grass, and used the grass for cover as I slid down the face of the hill. At one point, I stopped by a tree as I saw the A-1 coming in on its strafing run with guns blazing. Then I realized, almost to my horror that he was not on the run-in I had requested and his bullets were coming right at me! The last bullet hit the tree I was sitting by with a loud thud. I called off the strafing on my radio, telling the rescue aircraft that I was in position to be picked up. Then I was struck by an urge to dig the bullet out of the tree for a souvenir. I pulled out my knife and started trying to get the bullet, which was lodged deep in the tree. Almost immediately, reality jarred me back to my senses, telling me there was a much more important task at hand. Actually there had not been much I could have been doing while I was digging at the bullet, as the Sandy flight were setting up to drop white phosphorous smoke bombs to provide a curtain between me and the enemy to shield the rescue helicopters.

After all the noise that had been going on around me, the white phosphorous bombs landed without sound. Huge clouds of puffy white smoke rose from the impact of the bombs, but it wasn't where it was supposed to be! The curtain of smoke was to have been between the enemy and me, but it was between me and the rescue helicopters! This meant I would have to give the helicopters very good directions on the radio so they could locate me through all the smoke. The helicopter pilot was very experienced, and it wasn't too hard to direct him to my position. However, hearing the approach of the helicopter, the enemy troops realized that I was getting away, and started for the ridgeline, firing their weapons. The helicopter reeled out a "horse collar" to me on the end of a cable. As the "horse collar" was coming to the ground, I turned and fired my .38 up the hillside to discourage the enemy from coming over the ridgeline. That probably didn't do much good,

Photographer Wayne Knight

Bell 205 just returning from a mission at Long Tieng



but it made me feel better! As soon as the "horse collar" touched the ground, I was right there to put it on. The helicopter remained about 100 or so feet above. The crewman started reeling me upward, but the line was blown into the trees, and I was hung up. I knew this would be my only chance, so I was not about to signal to go back down. The pilot then yanked me right through the limbs and started flying away from the area as quickly as he could. The enemy had the helicopter in their sights, and there was no time to lose.

It was a big relief to be getting away, but I was hanging below the helicopter as it sped away, spinning dizzily while being winched up. With the earth spinning, I closed my eyes so as not to get dizzy. When I felt the crewman grab me to pull me into the open door of the helicopter, and I opened my eyes. As I was pulled into the door of the helicopter, I still had my .38 revolver in one hand, and all I wanted to do was empty my gun out the open door at the people who had shot my airplane down. There was no real direction to my shooting and probably nothing to hit where I was firing. Hearing the shots, the helicopter pilot was startled and asked what was happening. The crewman told him, and that was my introduction to the helicopter pilot who had dared to come in and pick me up in an unarmed helicopter. His name was Phil Goddard, and as I was to learn later, this wasn't the first daring rescue that he had pulled off.

I had been snatched out of the midst of the enemy's area, and the helicopter ride back to Udorn through enemy territory. We had to land twice to take on fuel to get back to Udorn – once at a mountaintop village where the local people rolled out a 55 gallon drum for each helicopter. The next stop was Long Tieng , where we fully refueled for the flight back to Udorn.

I bought a lot of drinks that night at the officers' club and was thankful to be back to fly another day.

Those who took part in the rescue were:

Laredo 01: Captain Alexander H. C. Harwick
(F-4) Lieutenant Donald Pease

Laredo 04: Captain John P. Jumper
(F-4) Lieutenant Clarence R. Andregg

Firefly 40: Lieutenant Noel Frisbie
(A-1)

Firefly 41: Captain Frank Monroe
(A-1)

Sandy 01: Lieutenant James George
(A-1)

Sandy 02: Lieutenant Anthony Wylie
(A-1)

Raven 41: Captain Allen
(O-1)

Air America: Phil Goddard, pilot
Phil Peyton, pilot
Leonard Bevan, crewman

Others:

Flight of F-105 fighter-bombers that attacked the antiaircraft sites on the road.

Second Air America helicopter that flew back-up in case the first helicopter should have been disabled or shot down.

A North Vietnamese MiG that joined the fray briefly when he thought there might be some easy targets.