

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Air Rescue Behind Enemy Lines

Article and photographs by
HOWARD SOCHUREK



Jolly Green
The Movie.com
ALL stars digitized
by UN

TWO AMERICAN PLANES were shot down, but their pilots were rescued." Such laconic reports are all too familiar, yet few of us have even an inkling of the deeds of self-sacrifice and valor behind the terse words. Here now is the little-known story, told by intrepid writer-photographer Howard Sochurek, author of three previous GEOGRAPHIC articles: "Viet Nam's Montagnards, Caught in the Jaws of a War," April, 1968, "American Special Forces in Action in Viet Nam," January, 1965, and "Slow Train Through Viet Nam's War," September, 1964.—EDITOR

Air Rescue Behind Enemy Lines

Article and photographs by
HOWARD SOCHUREK

THEY ARE CALLED Jolly Green Giants and Big Ugly Fat Fellows, and when they hover above North Viet Nam's perilous ocean of jungle, life hangs in the balance. They are watched over by Sandys and succored by Crowns. Inside them ride men called PJs and others wearing King Arthurs—and they are among the bravest and most selfless men I have ever known.

These are the strange, casual terms in the vocabulary of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service: 5,000 American airmen engaged in rescue work around the globe—most dramatically, in saving downed fliers from capture or death at the hands of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.

Whatever the outcome of the war and the peace talks—both in progress as I write—this is a drama that should be recorded. One of the things that war leaves in its brutal wake is the memory of acts of courage undertaken to save human life in the midst of so much taking of life.

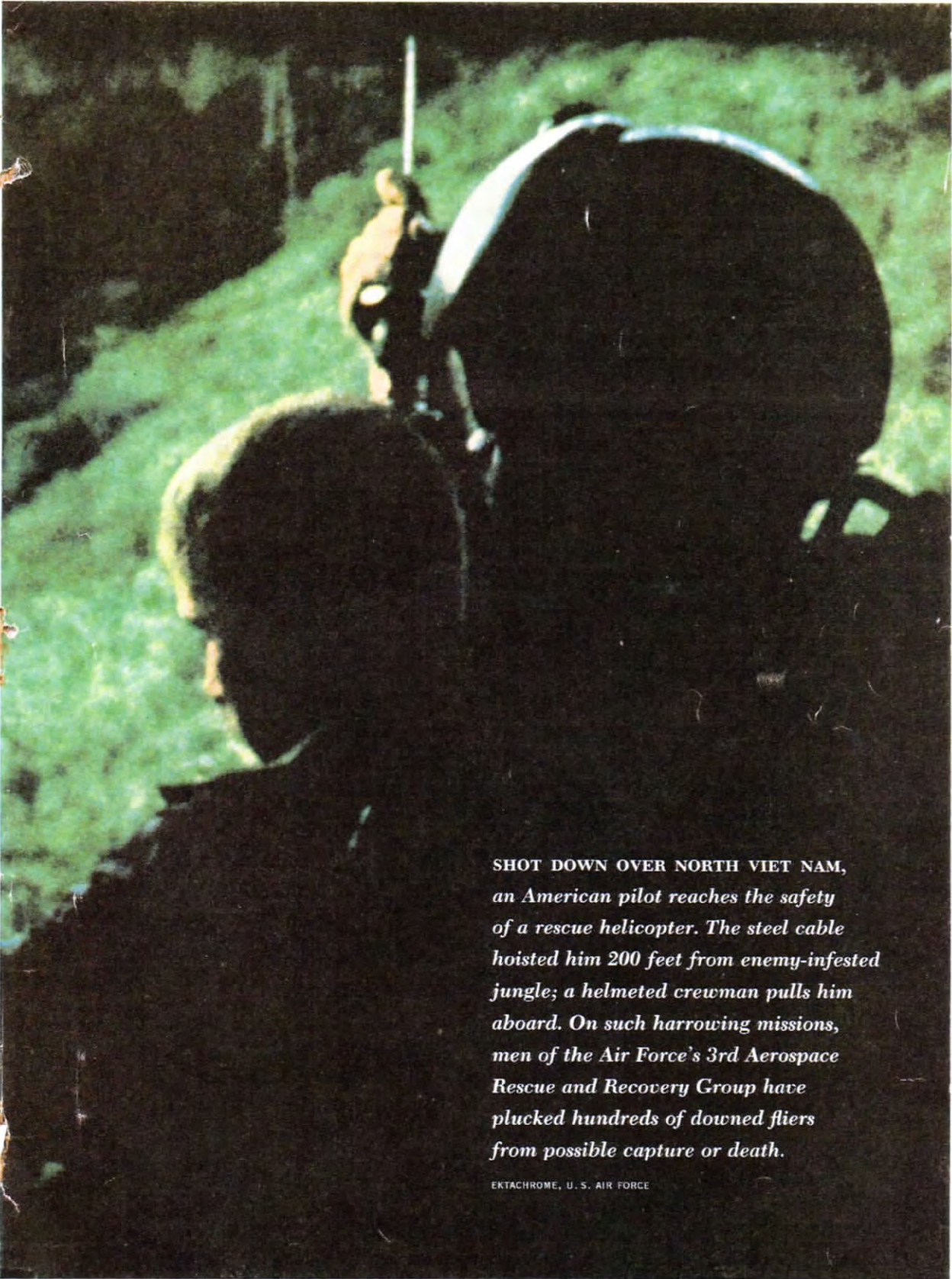
"Impossible to Describe the Sense of Joy"

Earlier this year I made my nineteenth trip to Viet Nam, this time to report the deeds of those detachments of the ARRS that fly to North Viet Nam. My notebooks have seldom recorded such moving experiences, related by the men who lived them.

Sgt. Jack Hoover of Salisbury, North Carolina, told me of his rescue of a pilot: "I was holding him cradled in my arms. He had been in the jungle for three days. There were tears in his eyes and he just kept patting me on the back endlessly. . . ."

I listened to the men who were rescued, like Capt. John A. Corder of Fort Worth, Texas: "I had a death grip on that penetrator. I didn't let go, not even after they had pulled me into the





*SHOT DOWN OVER NORTH VIET NAM,
an American pilot reaches the safety
of a rescue helicopter. The steel cable
hoisted him 200 feet from enemy-infested
jungle; a helmeted crewman pulls him
aboard. On such harrowing missions,
men of the Air Force's 3rd Aerospace
Rescue and Recovery Group have
plucked hundreds of downed fliers
from possible capture or death.*

EKTACHROME, U. S. AIR FORCE



STITCHPROVES BY U. S. AIR FORCE (BELOW) AND HOWARD SOCHUREK © N. O. S.

"Rescue's my lifework," says Sgt. Kerry Kelley (left and preceding page). He has trained intensively in medicine, survival, and even scuba diving to save fliers downed at sea. Scorning danger, he and his fellow pararescuemen eagerly toss coins to decide who will descend first into enemy territory to help disabled airmen.

Close to the action, rescue teams fly from forward bases at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom in Thailand, and Da Nang in South Viet Nam.

For a large-scale map of this area, see **Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand**, issued with the February, 1967, **GEOGRAPHIC**, and still obtainable. Paper map, \$1.10; fabric, \$2.30; index, 55 cents (postage paid).

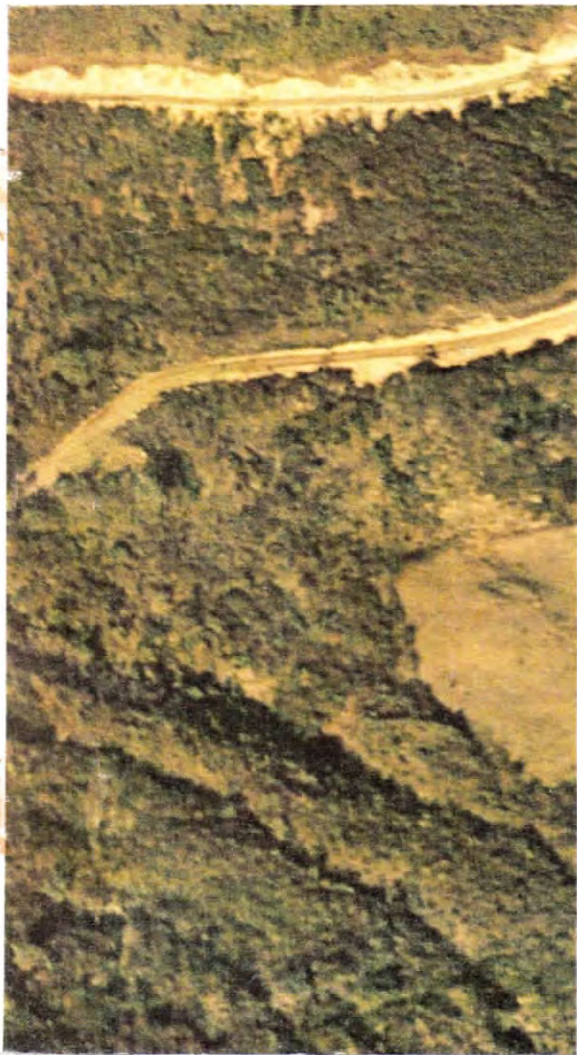
Mercy bus of the air war, a Sikorsky HH-53B crosses strands of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the web of dirt roads that feeds men and munitions to Communists in South Viet Nam. Fliers call the craft Buffs—Big Ugly Fat Fellows. They nickname smaller HH-3E's Jolly Green Giants, after a vegetable cannery trademark. In a typical rescue operation, fighter escorts strafe to suppress ground fire, and a circling tanker refuels choppers on long missions.

348





GEOGRAPHIC ART DIVISION © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



helicopter. It is impossible to describe the sense of joy you feel when others have risked their lives to save yours, and all of you have made it."

Aerial rescues in a combat area have never before been tried on such a scale, or with such success. As of this writing, U. S. Air Force teams in Southeast Asia have brought back 1,300 American servicemen, many of them wounded, plucking them from dense jungle with steel cables, snatching them from blazing fields of battle, fishing them from enemy waters.

The Air Force, with its Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service under the Military Airlift Command, has the over-all responsibility. But in areas where the Navy operates, equally skilled naval crews carry out their own rescue operations. Aboard a carrier and at bases in Viet Nam and Thailand, I saw the men and machines in action. The Air Force men fly Sikorsky HH-3E helicopters—Jolly Green Giants—and the larger Sikorsky HH-53B's, the Big Ugly Fat Fellows, or Buffs, which are also called Super Jollys. Navy rescue teams use Sikorsky SH-3A's—Big Mothers—and Kaman UH-2 Seasprites.*

Big Mothers, guarded by carrier-based fighters, have often reached into North Viet Nam to pluck Air Force and Navy airmen from hills around Haiphong. Most Navy rescues are made at sea, however, where destroyers and helicopters keep an eye on returning aircrews (pages 368-9).

Thirty Men Risk Lives to Save One

"When a man is down," Col. Paul E. Leske observed at an ARRS station in Thailand, "he is far more than a statistic. He is a fellow American, with a family at home, with hopes and dreams and a potential that cannot be measured. He is a man in trouble, and he needs help fast."

On one occasion, Colonel Leske, commander of the 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group, which covers all Southeast Asia, committed 11 aircraft, crewed by 30 men, to 123 combat sorties during 10½ hours of rescue efforts to bring one pilot back to safety.

The air-rescue teams assigned to missions in North Viet Nam are stationed at Da Nang in South Viet Nam, at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand, and at Udon Royal Thai Air Force Base, due west of Nakhon Phanom (map, above).

February 27, 1968, was an unusually chilly day at Udon. It was just before the rainy

*See "The Incredible Helicopter," by Peter T. White, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, April, 1959.

Battle tension grips a backup team at Udorn during a massive lifesaving mission (following pages). Listening to radioed reports from the scene, worried pilots and pararescuemen—called “PJs” from an older designation, parajumpers—share the strain of their buddies under fire. On the telephone, operations officer Lt. Col. Garland York receives an order from nearby command headquarters: “Alert reserve chopper.”

season, and a gray sky stretched over the base. Far to the east, in the jungle mountains south of the Mu Gia Pass and north of Khe Sanh, the sun was beaming down on a disaster. An aircraft with nine men aboard had been shot down near the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron had responded immediately. Maj. Frederic (Marty) Donohue, who usually has a pipe clamped in his mouth but is always losing it nonetheless, was piloting a Buff at “full blower,” nearly 200 miles an hour, toward North Viet Nam as I arrived at the operations shack at Udorn.

With Major Donohue was his copilot, 1st Lt. Leone Russo, a small and bald man called “Lennie the Gnome”—a name that had stuck to him from the days when he did the “Lennie and Liz” Saturday morning children’s show on WKSU in Kent, Ohio (page 355). Both pilots were wearing armored vests called King Arthurs. Also in the crew were two pararescuemen—still known as PJs for their old name, parajumpers—and an engineer to operate the ingenious rescue device called the penetrator.

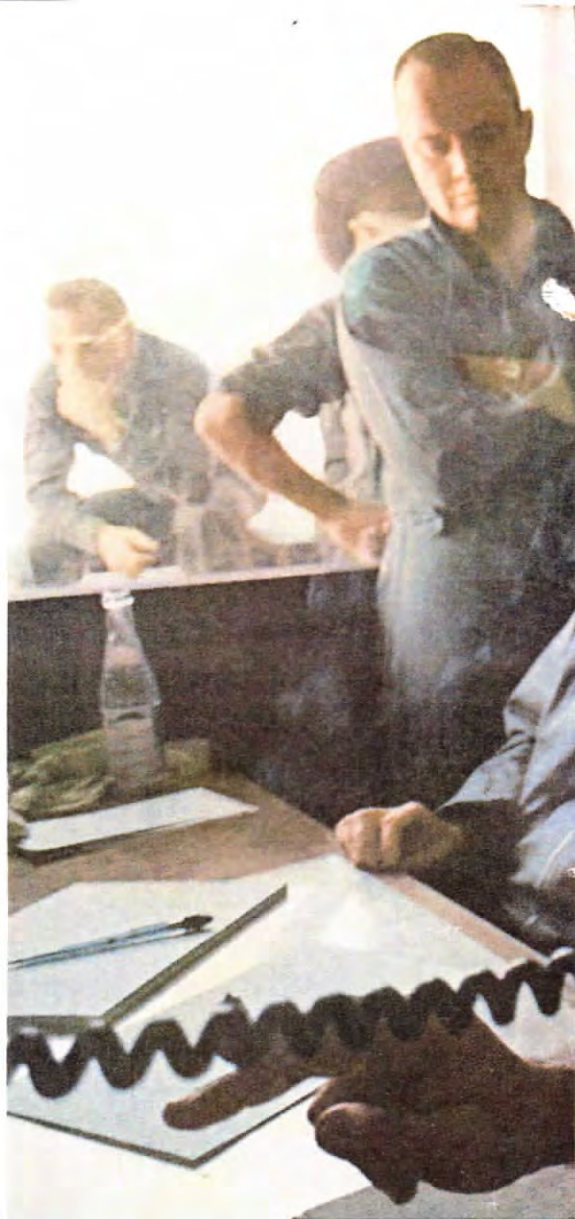
Smoke Puff Signals Hovering Chopper

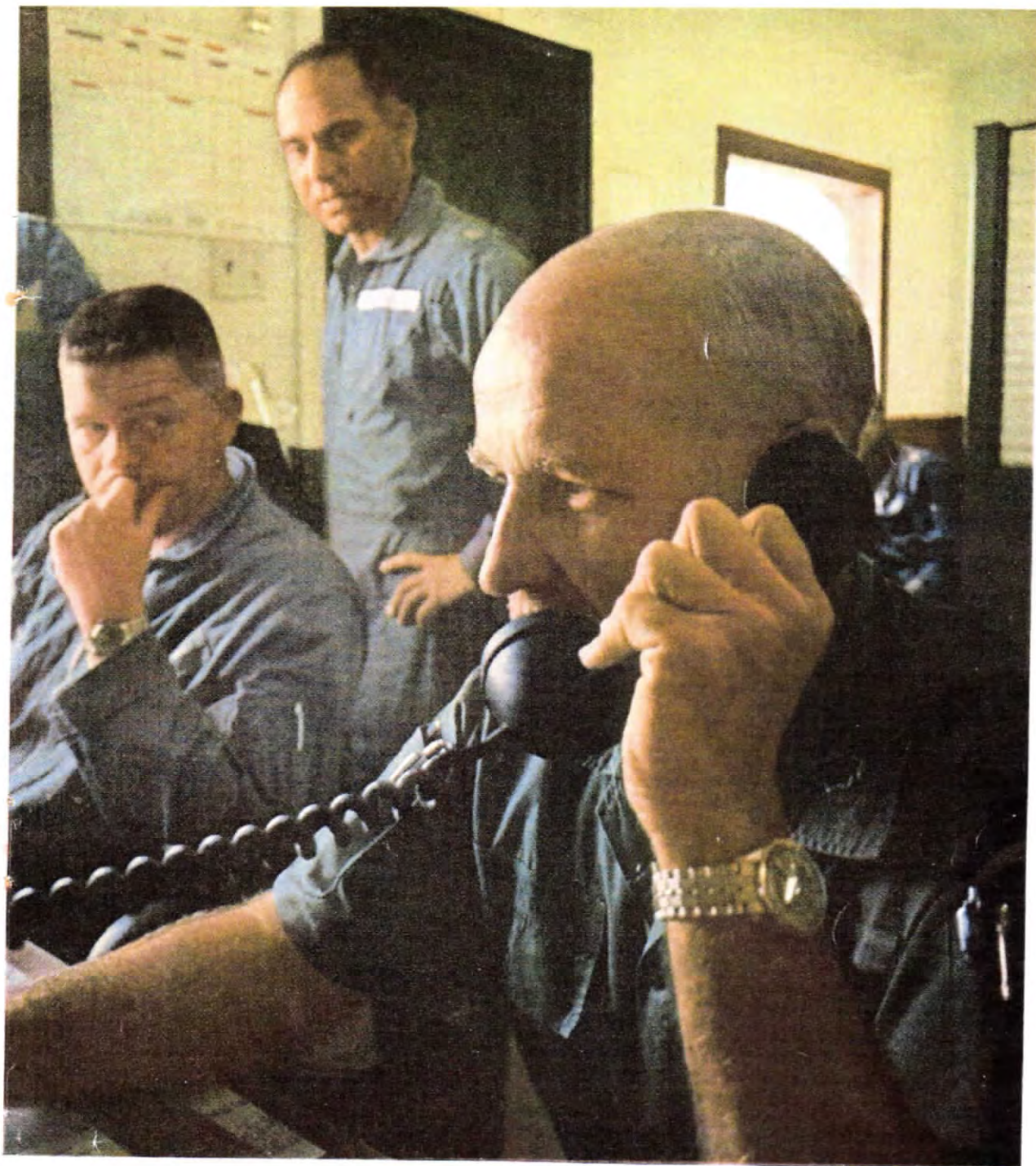
Homing in on beeper signals from radios carried in every airman’s survival vest, the rescue helicopters hover over the area, 50 to 200 feet above the ground. Because the jungle is so dense and tall, crewmen seldom see the man they are trying to rescue, but usually they are in radio contact. The chopper waits until the downed flier “pops smoke,” and the telltale wisp of white or red from the chemical-filled canister drifts through the canopy of leaves.

On the right side of the Jolly Green, an outrigger holds a hoist mechanism with 250 feet of 3/16-inch steel cable wound on a drum. Attached to the free end of the cable is the jungle penetrator, a 26-pound metal device shaped like a giant arrowhead with three narrow paddle seats folded against its sides. It is partially wrapped in a canvas cover to

minimize damage as it plummets downward, penetrates the jungle roof, splinters branches—as close as possible to the anxious airman. He pulls a paddle down, straddles it, and holds on for dear life as the hoist reels him up to safety. If the survivor reports by his hand radio that he is injured, a PJ rides down on the penetrator and brings him up.

The rescue crews in the Jolly Greens must push luck and endurance to the limits if they are to succeed. They must worry about the fuel holding out, about control of the ship when a man is on the penetrator and ground fire is knocking holes in everything, about





EXTRACTED BY HOWARD SOCHUREK © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

hanging the survivor or the PJ in the iron grip of a tree, about the weather closing down suddenly, about heading for an emergency field only to find it overrun by the enemy.

The men who gathered now around the radio in the operations shack at Udorn were solemn because they lived daily with those worries (above). The rescue team was converging at the site of the downed plane. Four fighter planes, Douglas A-1H Skyraiders, had scrambled from Udorn at the first news of the crash. In the rescue team, the fighters are called Sandys. Their job is to protect the helicopters during the rescue.

The plane and the nine men had been

down for about an hour when the radio at Udorn crackled on. It was Sandy Lead reporting from North Viet Nam: "Made low passes. No ground fire as yet. Have most of the parachutes located."

Two Jolly Greens from Da Nang and two others from Nakhon Phanom were nearing the area, and now Marty Donohue, in the Buff from Udorn, came on: "Give me a heading. We'll be there in 15 minutes."

There is a roaring amount of radio chatter during a rescue—helicopter crewmen coaching their pilots, Sandys talking amongst themselves, choppers talking to Sandys, beepers from the jungle below going in everyone's ears.



Like a swarm of buzzing hornets, a precision team zooms in to snatch airmen from the enemy's grasp. On a slope above the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a U. S. plane shot down by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft billows black smoke, right. Twin-tailed Cessna spotting planes, still on the scene, spied crewmen's parachutes. Now one of four Douglas Skyraider A-1H's, foreground, spits gunfire and rockets at machine gunners near a



PAINTING BY PIERRE MION © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

prisoner-of-war camp, left. Close by, a hovering Jolly Green hoists a flier aboard; two others spot chutes and a red smoke flare, and home in on radioed distress beeps. A Buff searches near the smoldering wreck; a refueling plane circles at upper left. After five grueling hours, seven survivors rode copters to safety. Eyewitness accounts and artist Mion's own experience in Viet Nam enabled him to re-create an actual rescue.

At 1:30, Sandy Lead reported again: "Jolly Green 10 going in to make a pickup." And a little later: "Jolly Green 10 is over another who is hanging upside down in his chute."

Lt. Col. Garland York, the detachment operations officer (page 351), was standing beside me. He said: "I'll bet Marty has bitten his pipe stem in two. Da Nang's got two already." Tremendous rivalry exists among the rescue men; each team wants to make more combat saves than the others.

I could visualize the scene, for I had been in that enemy area—5,000-foot jungle mountains that slope into high valleys. Sheer, white-faced cliffs of limestone stand out from the green forest like islands with flat rock tops (preceding pages). I remembered the dusty roads along the edges of the fast rivers, and the thatched mountain villages that cling to the high ground. All of us at Udorn knew that those roads were alive with enemy troops hurrying to capture the downed Americans and to break up the rescue with ground fire. Every moment was precious.

Three Jolly Greens were now at the scene, and Donohue in the Buff and the fourth JG were held in reserve. Before 2 o'clock, Sandy Lead reported again: "Have six people aboard the Jollys, three still in area. Might have to launch alpha romeo up here if we get in a bind. Jollys had to dump fuel."

Crown Feeds Fuel to Flying Jolly

"Alpha romeo" means aerial refueling. The smaller choppers had needed all the power they could muster to hover in that high, thin mountain air. They had dumped their extra fuel overboard to lighten the load, and some did not have enough to return to base.

When that happens, as it often does over North Viet Nam, a Crown joins the Sandys, Jollys, and Buffs. It is a Lockheed Hercules HC-130P that has been circling high above the action and out of anti-aircraft range.

The Jollys have 7-foot probes that can be extended to 16 feet for refueling. With their load of saved—and sometimes wounded—men, they often must seek out the Crown for fuel. Their probes gulp as much as 200 gallons a minute once they link up with the drogue hoses that trail behind the big Lockheed (page 365).

Now Udorn command was urgently asking Sandy Lead: "Did everyone get out of the wreckage?"

"Jolly Green 10 has copilot of plane aboard

and he advises he saw only four chutes besides his own...."

Then, at 2 o'clock, came another report: "JG 37 is making another pickup."

Smiles broke out all around in the operations shack.

"That's seven out of nine," said Colonel York. The record number of saves over enemy territory up to then was eight at one time, and the men at Udorn were elated at the spectacular success of this rescue mission.

It was now after 2 o'clock. Two Jollys headed for the Crown to get aerial refills, and two others turned for home. Then a beeper signal was reported from the ground. Was it a trap?

Enemy Tries to Lure Rescue Crews

This is one of the constant worries of the ARRS over North Viet Nam. Using captured radios, the North Vietnamese put up beeper signals, hoping to lure a rescue team within range of their guns.

As a countermeasure, Rescue Control Headquarters keeps a secret question-and-answer card for every airman on a mission to the north. Before a JG is committed, the man on the ground is quizzed by radio.

I learned later that during this rescue near Khe Sanh, one of the Jollys had asked one of the downed men for authenticating answers.

"What kind of car do you drive?"

"A Volkswagen," came the reply.

"What is the code name of your mission?"

"Classmate."

"What is your wife's first name?"

There was a long and awkward silence. Stress does strange things to the mind. Finally: "Good Lord, I can't remember!"

The man was saved, but he might have faced a fate worse than capture if his wife had found out about that lapse.

Now Major Donohue was ordered in to investigate the last beeper signal. One of the survivors in the Jollys had said he thought a man was still in the plane and wounded. But no further signals came from below. Perhaps the man was too badly wounded to reply. Or was it the enemy down there, watching and waiting with loaded guns?

No word came from Donohue until nearly 3 o'clock. Then we received this:

"Heavy ground fire. Receiving heavy ground fire. Have a leak."

The men in the shack stiffened. It *had* been a trap! Colonel York kept saying to himself,



EXTACHROMES BY HOWARD SOCHUREK © N.G.S.



“The bravest men I’ve met”

THUS AUTHOR SOCHUREK, veteran of 19 trips to report on the Viet Nam war, characterizes the selfless men of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service. Capt. Gregory A. M. Etzel, still on crutches, crashed while attempting to recover seven downed fliers west of Hanoi. He and his crew lived off the jungle for three days before another team pulled them out. First Lt. Leone Russo (upper right) flew as copilot with Maj. Frederic M. Donohue (center) in the dramatic rescue portrayed on pages 352-3; their Buff limped back riddled with 24 bullet holes. Checking in after a long and exhausting mission, Lt. Col. James M. Dixon (lower), commander of a rescue detachment, wears the war on his face. All dedicate themselves to the ARRS motto, “That others may live.”



load the fuel through rubber hoses. Then we would kick the barrel out of the helicopter to make room for the survivor."

With Sikorsky engineers, Colonel Leske helped tailor the Air Force CH-3C to rescue needs. The result was the HH-3E, the Jolly Green now in use over North Viet Nam. The cabin of the still-newer HH-53B, the Buff, is roomy. Two gas-turbine engines drive its rotors. These ships have witnessed every imaginable emergency.

Flier Ejects Into Pitch-black Night

One episode, which I found unforgettable, involved Capt. Herbert (Hesh) Altman of Boston. I heard about it when he dropped by Udorn to thank the PJ's who saved his life.

Hesh graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1962. At 29, lean and round-faced, he had the virile look that a bad scar on cheek and forehead gives a handsome man. He was on his fifteenth mission, flying as navigator in

the back seat of a McDonnell F-4D Phantom II, when he ejected, or "punched out."

"We were on a night mission to hit the supply route just south of the Mu Gia Pass," he said when I asked him the details. "You know the place. It's an area of volcanic crags and steep limestone cliffs. We rolled in over the trucks on a rocket pass, pickled two rockets against the trucks, and jinked."

Hesh used "pickled" for "fired"; by "jinked," he meant making a sudden change in the plane's altitude and direction to keep radar-controlled weapons from scoring a hit.

"As we jinked, I saw tracers cross in an X right over our canopy, and I said, 'Judas, they almost got us,' to nobody in particular. But they *had* got us. We pulled up suddenly and then nosed over. We were down from 6,000 feet to 4,000 in 15 seconds.

"My pilot yelled, 'Get out, Hesh, get out, get out,' and I ejected. It was 7 o'clock and a pitch-black moonless night.



With luminous hieroglyphs, Thai airmen record positions of enemy and friendly aircraft on a transparent plotting board. It gleams at the rear of the Control and Reporting Center at Udorn (left), jointly manned by Thai and U. S. personnel.

Watching through radar eyes, the Control and Reporting Center follows aircraft as lighted blips on its scopes. It assists in rescues by maintaining precise fixes on disabled planes, even when the pilots have lost their way. Once the nerve center pinpoints a crash, pararescuers still approach warily. Speaking English over captured radios, North Vietnamese sometimes lure rescuers over gun positions. Headquarters keeps a list of personal questions for every combat flier: when shot down, he must verify his identity by answering correctly.

"Return the fire, return the fire." Each Buff is equipped with three Miniguns, 7.62-mm. automatic weapons. Now the Sandys, too, reported heavy fire, and Udorn command ordered all rescue craft out of the area.

I asked Colonel York what shape Major Donohue was in.

"If the hydraulic system fails, the controls can go in a split second and you can't fight it. If the leak is in the fuel tank, thank God. There's special sealant in there, or we would have lost three aircraft by now."

Sandy Leads Crippled Buff to Safety

As we talked, the radio broke in with an urgent message from a Sandy to Donohue. "You are going into a bad area, a bad area."

The crippled Buff was about to cross a heavily defended branch of the main north-south supply route from North into South Viet Nam. It was bristling with 37-mm. and 57-mm. radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns,

probably the same ones that had brought down the plane they went in to help.

The Sandy guided Major Donohue safely around the bad area, and he eventually landed at an emergency strip. Later he called in on "lima-lima"—land-line telephone—with a battle report: One bullet hole through the tail rotor drive shaft. Two hydraulic lines severed. One hit in the electronics compartment. One bullet stuck in the refueling probe. Twenty-four bullet holes in the helicopter. But all hands survived.

A few days later I chatted at length with the 3rd Rescue Group's commander.

"Things were a little makeshift when we first started the rescue operation out here," Colonel Leske recalled. "Before the Jolly Greens, and later the Buffs, appeared, we flew the little Kaman HH-43 Pedros with wooden counter-rotating blades. We carried 50-gallon drums of fuel aboard. When the tanks ran low, we would crank a pump by hand and

356





Over a landscape seemingly serene, a Buff roves North Vietnamese highlands that can erupt with enemy fire at any moment. Milky clouds screen the craft from ground fire, but also hinder

"I saw the plane continue its dive after I got out. It buried itself in the steep slope of the cliff beneath me, doing 500 knots in a 30-degree dive, and when it exploded, parts of it hit me while I was still falling. I thought I was going to die right there.

"Then my chute popped, and I was in the air only five seconds before I hit. The chute caught in tree branches, slowing the fall before I slammed into a rock crevice so tightly that circulation was cut in both my legs. I

noticed I had lost my watch, and the right side of my head was wet and sticky from a burn where I had been hit by the flying debris.

"I got out my radio and called the wingman who was circling overhead. I told him, 'I'm stuck in a crevice down here next to the burning airplane.'

"He answered, 'Have you spotted?'

"I looked down the mountain slope below me, about 1,000 feet straight down. On came North Vietnamese truck headlights along the



EKTACHROME, U. S. AIR FORCE

the search for survivors. Outboard gas-turbine engines can drive the chopper at speeds close to 200 miles an hour; bomb-shaped auxiliary fuel tanks can be jettisoned in emergencies.

Ho Chi Minh Trail. It looked like a Los Angeles freeway. I will never know why they couldn't see me hanging in that rock [page 366]. In a period of about 20 minutes, I counted 40 trucks.

"Then my pilot, who was down somewhere near me, came in on his rescue radio, talking to the wingman in the air.

"He half whispered, 'They're coming down the hill with lanterns. There are bad guys all over the place. I don't think I'm going to make

it. I'm signing off. Don't come in on beeper in the morning.'"

Hesh wondered where his pilot was. He later learned that the pilot had buried himself in shrubs at the bottom of the slope near the road and had remained hidden the whole night as regular North Vietnamese soldiers searched for him with lanterns.

"After a long time," Hesh said, "the Sandys showed up and advised that rescue was not going to attempt a pickup that night. They



ENTACHROME, U. S. AIR FORCE

told me to hang loose and they would be back at dawn."

All through that long night Hesh had visitors, small animals he could hear scrambling around him. He was illuminated at times by fires started by chunks of burning aircraft.

Visitor Entertains a Lonely Airman

"About midnight," Hesh went on, "a chestnut-brown monkey came to see the burning wreckage and I said, 'Hi, monkey.' I petted her for about an hour, happy to have company. I scratched her under the chin and she really liked that. Seemed to me that she had been petted before. She crawled up and kept playing with my vest. I was trying to get my strobe light out in case I had a chance to signal. I had to take off my gloves to do it, and the monkey stole my gloves.

"I dozed off, but every time the wind blew, parts of the aircraft would fall out of the trees. I imagined noises behind me, even thought I heard bolt-action rifles being cocked.

"About daybreak I felt numb from the waist down and was hurting everywhere. It

took two hands to use my radio. My batteries were loose and had to be held in place.

"About 0600 a Crown showed up and asked me for ten seconds of beep. I gave it to them.

"Then my pilot came on the air from down below and asked the Sandys to strafe the road. A work crew had appeared at dawn and was working 20 feet from his position.

"There was no firing other than their strafing, but over the hill a war was going on as Sandys hit AA gun positions.

"At 0745 I heard the choppers come in. I told them to get my aircraft commander first because he was down there with the bad guys. I had a bird's-eye view of the rescue with the chopper only 100 yards away.

"After they pulled the AC aboard, the same chopper came after me. Then we ran into problems. I was wedged in the rock and couldn't move. I asked to have the PJ come down to get me, but every time he got close he missed me. They just couldn't hover near enough because of the sheer cliff.

"The down draft whipped my parachute around my neck. Finally they swung the

Rescue!

With a flash of fire (left), a Buff's Minigun pins down enemy snipers. On the ground fighter pilots Tracy Dorsett and John A. Corder await the outcome of a race between rescuers and prowling Communists. An hour earlier, the Air Force captains' plane was hit during a bombing run near Hanoi, and they ejected. Their wingman alerted rescue headquarters, and soon two choppers were on the scene.



Searching from a chopper, flight engineer Sgt. Gene A. Sellers (top, right) spots Corder's smoke flare and picks up the sound of his beeper. Coaching the chopper pilot, Sellers directs the 20-ton bird until it shudders to a standstill 200 feet above Corder, still hidden by dense foliage. Sellers reels out a cable, lowering a collapsible chair lift called a jungle penetrator to within arm's length of Corder. Unseen below, the captain unfolds a seat on the penetrator and straddles it as he would a merry-go-round horse. Then he signals to Sellers.

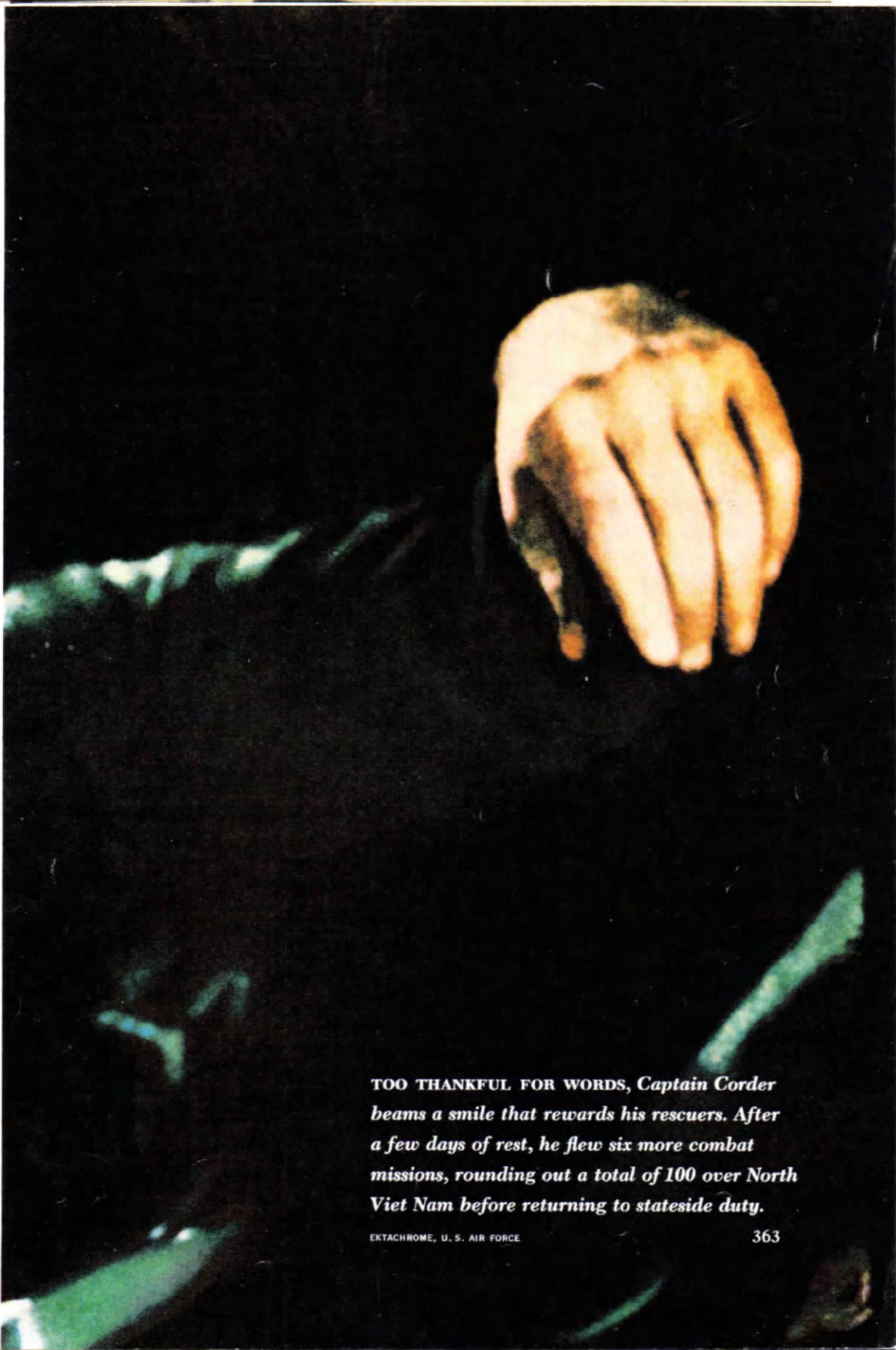


Riding the penetrator, Captain Corder clears the treetops in his perilous ascent. His crossed legs extend to the left, and his flying suit appears almost white against the jungle's deep green in this frame from a 16-mm. movie sequence. So far his luck holds; no snipers fire on him.

At the threshold of safety, Corder still shields his head with his arm. Sellers leans from the hatch to pull the pilot aboard. As Corder gained the sanctuary (here and following pages), a second chopper descended for Captain Dorsett.







TOO THANKFUL FOR WORDS, Captain Corder beams a smile that rewards his rescuers. After a few days of rest, he flew six more combat missions, rounding out a total of 100 over North Viet Nam before returning to stateside duty.

EKTACHROME, U. S. AIR FORCE

363

penetrator in like a pendulum and I grabbed it and pulled myself out of the crevice [page 367]. I went up and down three times, messed up in chute, shroud lines, and branches. The third time up, they pulled me aboard, and I just lay on my back in the helicopter looking up at the PJ.

"I said, 'God, you look beautiful.'

"These Jolly Green boys are a breed all by their lonesome. As happy as we were to get picked up, the Jolly Greens were even happier to have done it."

Another visitor to Udorn when I was there was Capt. Gregory A. M. Etzel from Albany, Georgia, who wears the coveted Air Force Cross among his decorations. He came limping in on crutches one morning (page 355).

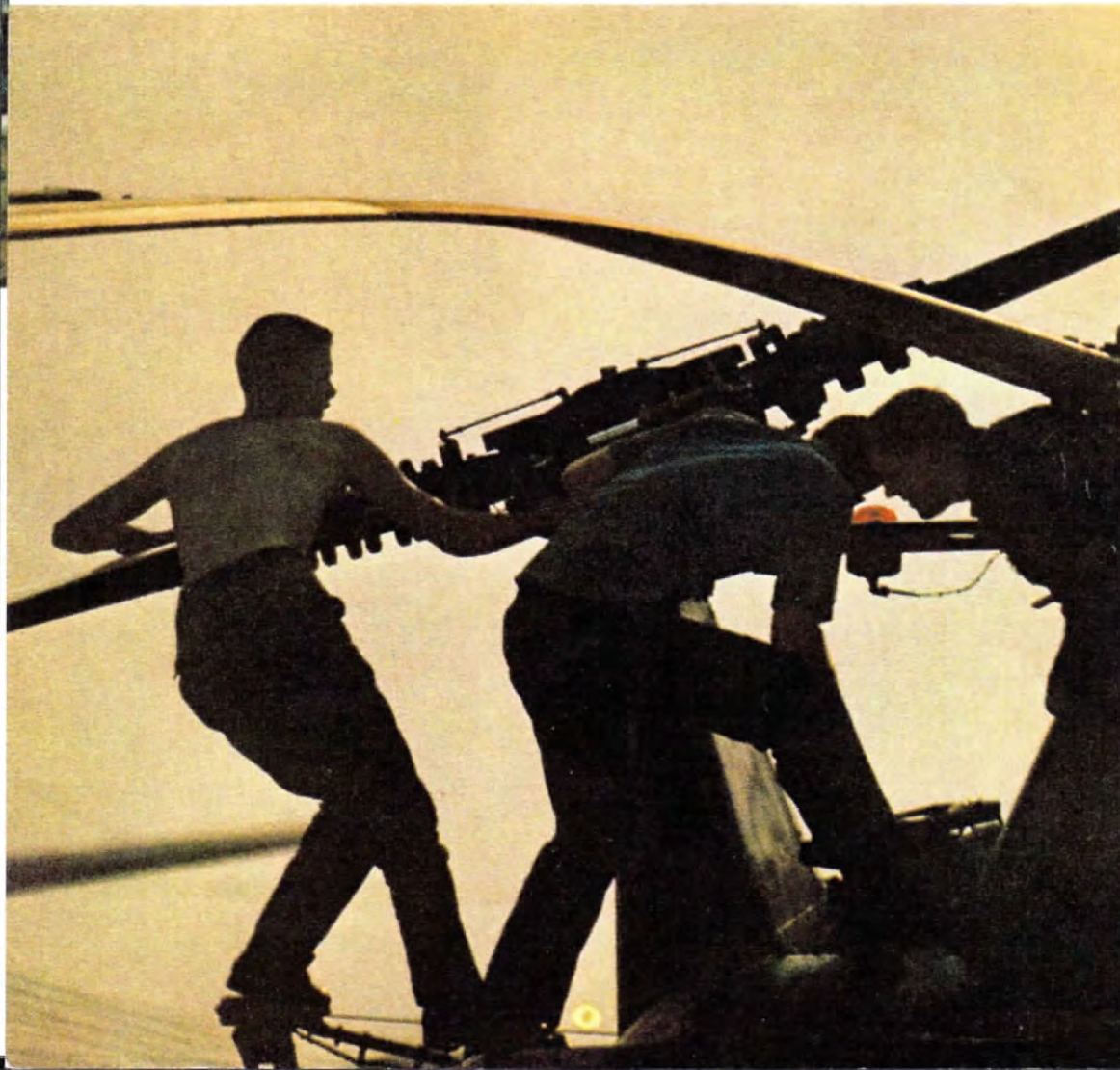
364 He was injured on January 15, 1968—a day

those who lived through it will never forget.

It began when an Air Force plane with seven men aboard was hit by an air-to-air missile fired by a MIG-21 and went down about 80 miles west of Hanoi. When rescue got the call, Captain Etzel with a crew of four took off in a Jolly Green for the crash site.

"Visibility was 50 feet," he said, "and clouds were pouring like milk over the edge of the cliff. We had one more ridge to cross when we hit the mountainside. The rotor blades broke on impact, the right front section of the cockpit fell off, and I was thrown clear of the ship still strapped in my seat."

The rescue crew suffered serious injuries. Captain Etzel had a broken leg. Capt. David Holt, the copilot, had a broken foot. The PJ, Sgt. Angus Sowell, had broken both a leg





EXTACHROME, U. S. AIR FORCE

EXTACHROME BY HOWARD SOCHURTA © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



Thirsty bug, a Buff refuels by slipping its 16-foot proboscis into a flowerlike drogue on one of two fuel hoses that trail behind a Lockheed HC-130P. The chopper must synchronize speed for as long as ten minutes while it drinks from the flying filling station, called Crown.

War dictates the workday as Udorn airmen labor on into sunset; they repair twin rotors of a Kaman HH-43B Pedro, a helicopter used for base emergencies. Rushing in fire fighters and equipment, it can hover over a burning crash so the downwash of its rotors blasts back flames, clearing a path to the cockpit.

and an arm. Two others in the crew, A2c James Sadderley and Staff Sgt. Elwood (Jim) Beam, had escaped injury.

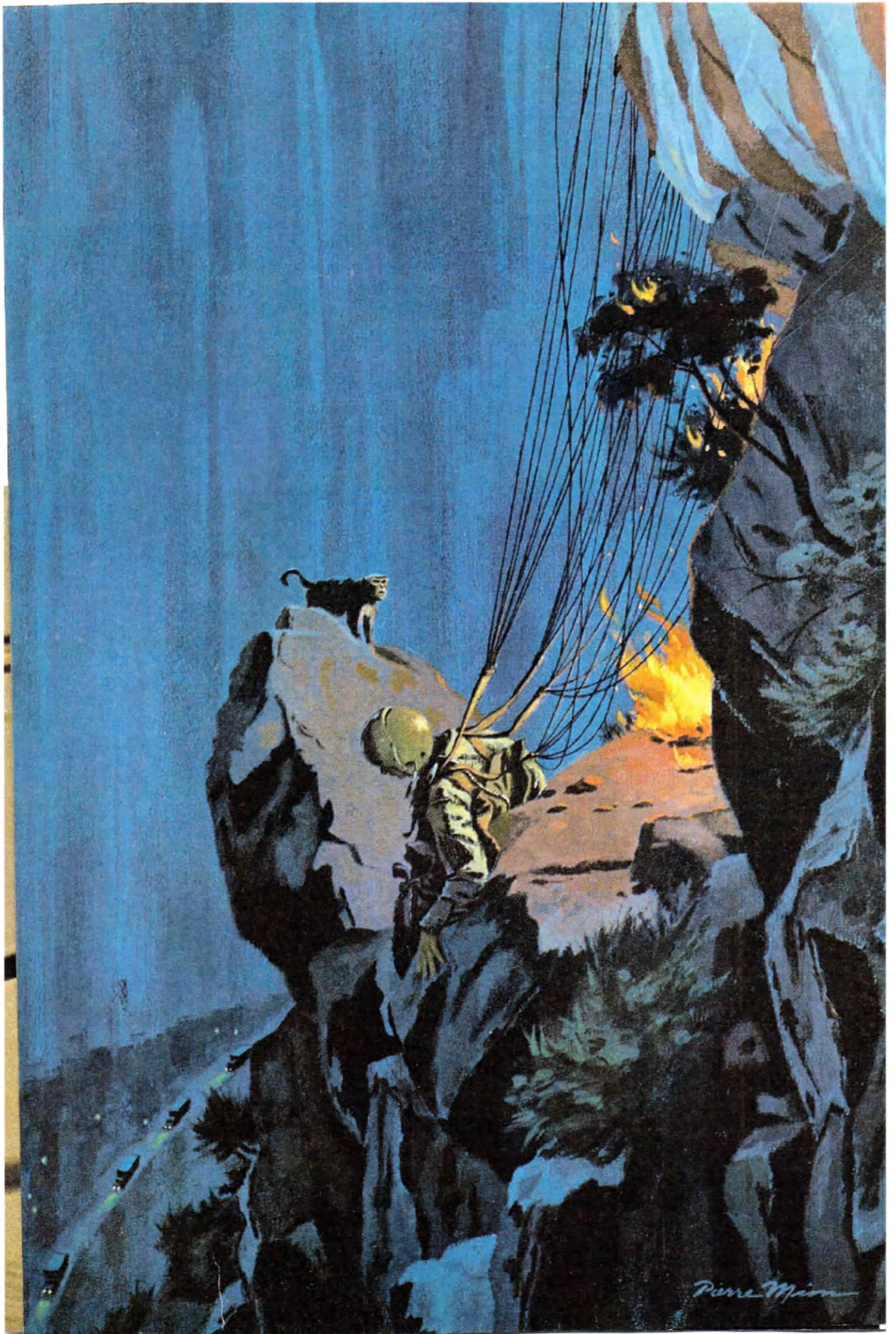
The five men found themselves on a rock face that dropped at a 45-degree angle. Clouds and mist swirled over them, making prompt rescue impossible. The rock they were on was black and slippery with wet vegetation and moss. They tied stretchers to the ruins of the helicopter to keep the injured men level and waited in the fog.

Now there were two ships, the Air Force plane and the rescue helicopter, with a total of 12 men, down in North Viet Nam.

The uninjured men of the rescue crew, Sadderley and Beam, found some jungle water vines on the mountainside below the wreck and worked for almost two hours squeezing out one and a half quarts. On the morning of the third day, hoping to find a spring, they climbed down to a little ledge, but heard noises and voices through the thick fog about 20 feet away. They quietly crept back up the hill and broke out weapons. There they sat, a small and crippled armed camp.

The weather cleared on the morning of the 17th, and the men at Udorn set out to find both downed crews.

The pickup of the plane crew came first. I spoke later with Airman Michael Dodd of San Antonio, Texas, and



Sgt. Jack Hoover—the PJ's who pulled the plane survivors out.

Dodd said the jungle was so thick they passed right over the aircraft commander at 50 yards. When he popped smoke, it took three minutes to drift up through the foliage.

Assignment Decided by Toss of a Coin

The plane commander had a broken leg, and Dodd went down on the penetrator to get him. He had won the toss that morning; the winner among the PJ's goes down first.

They located two other survivors. Hoover remembers when they got the second one, a pilot-navigator, up to the Buff. "He went to the back of the cabin where his aircraft commander was lying on a stretcher, and they just hugged each other for a long time out of relief at being saved."

No trace was found of the other four crew members, who presumably were captured.

A second Udorn Buff, under the command of Capt. Russell Cayler and with the operations officer, Colonel York, aboard, had been searching in vain for their comrades lost on the mountainside.

"Our escort Sandy," Cayler told me, "had engine trouble, so we started back. We were about five minutes on our way home when I decided to make a last effort to find Captain Etzel and his crew. We turned around and went back alone. About that time, another Sandy showed up and spotted the wreckage. He snapped his wing to indicate the position and then we saw a pen flare and red smoke."

What followed is a measure of the caliber of the nerves of men of the ARRS. Again, it is best told largely in the words of Captain Cayler, who lived it: "Now we really started

to sweat. The Sandy was reporting only five minutes to complete cloud cover. For some unknown reason fuel was leaking from our main fuel tanks. With the leak we were only 15 minutes to 'bingo' fuel [just enough to return to base].

"The communications jam-up was impossible. I was getting voices from Crown, from Sandys, from my own crew, and beeps from the survivors' radio. I remember hearing the engineer say 'Sir, the cable is fraying' and then 'Sir, I don't think the cable will hold' and finally 'Sir, are you listening?' I finally had to order everyone off the air so I could talk to my hoist operator. I thought to myself, Cayler, if you don't get these boys now, you won't have a second chance.

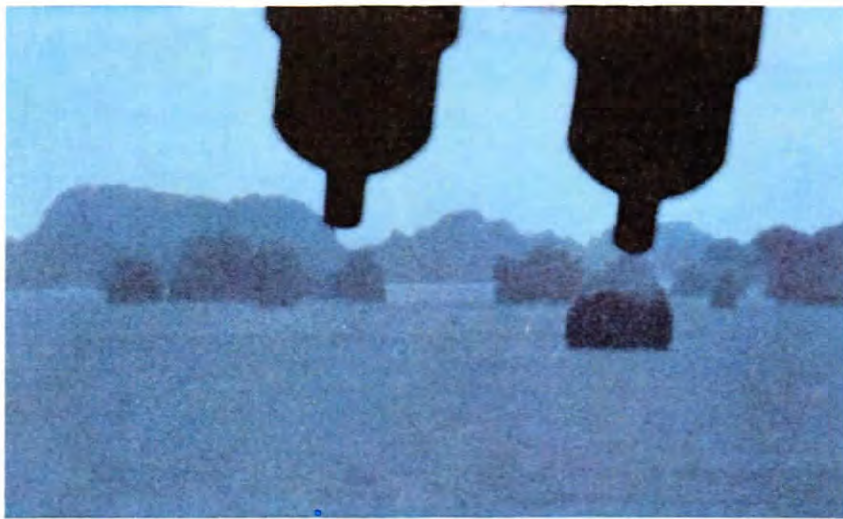
"Well, we made seven trips on that hoist with the cable fraying and recovered the five survivors and our own two PJ's. We were hovering about 100 feet off the cliff and occasionally tipped the tree branches with our rotor blades.

"The Sandys kept warning us about the weather, and Udorn kept asking us about our fuel level. With all survivors now aboard, we started to gain altitude. I remembered a chimney of limestone right behind us, but in

Night on the brink of disaster: Pinned where he landed in a rock crevice, Capt. Herbert Altman becomes an unwilling spectator as trucks rumble south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail 1,000 feet below. The navigator bailed out during a night strike last December. Drawn by the flaming wreckage of his plane, enemy troops search the area; a friendly monkey keeps him company. At dawn, a chopper arrives and lowers a yellow jungle penetrator, right. Catching it, Altman wrenched himself loose from the crevice, but became ensnarled in a tangle of parachute lines and branches; three pulls from the hoist finally freed him for the lifesaving lift.



PAINTINGS BY PIERRE VIGNÉ, U.S.S.



EKTACHROMES, U. S. NAVY



Lifesaving the Navy way

GUIDED by the radio beeps of a carrier pilot downed off Haiphong, a Navy helicopter warily approaches haystack-shaped coastal islands, here seen beneath the craft's overhead engine controls (left). Moments later, crewmen sighted Lt. (j.g.) Cody A. Balisteri, the pilot. Near Hanoi, ground fire had crippled his LTV F-8 Crusader, and he headed for open water to ditch. Parachuting onto an island, he crawled down steep rocks to the water's edge.

Hovering off the treacherous rocks, the chopper lowered pararescueman Gary W. Smith, who swam to Balisteri and inflated a raft. Now he helps the pilot aboard (left).

Swimming, Smith tows the pilot clear of the rocks and helps him into the chopper's horse-collar sling. But the cable hoist fails: now the chopper must descend for the pickup—a perilous maneuver in which a single gust can drive the craft into the sea. Only five feet above the waves (opposite). Petty Officer Royce L. Roberts thrusts down a saving hand to pull Balisteri on board. Smith waits his turn as the team completes one of the feats of heroism that have become routine in Viet Nam.

less than 15 seconds we were in the clouds. Everything whited out. Finally we broke out at 4,000 feet and, bam, both engines began to die. We started sinking back into the soup. The rpm on the left engine gauge unwound and dropped to 20 percent, the right engine to 50 percent. Without thinking, I shouted: 'Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!'

"I slammed the right engine into cross feed, thinking it was fuel starvation. Colonel York slammed the left engine to cross feed. The right engine caught and came back. The left engine went dead completely.

"A Sandy pulled up alongside. 'We've got only one engine going,' I told him.

"He asked, 'Can you hold your own?'

"I answered, 'I think so.'"

Captain Cayler explained that his only hope was to reach an emergency field. He was

low on fuel and had trouble holding altitude. He had two heavily defended main roads to cross, and he'll never understand why he didn't get shot down. But he made it, with ten exhausted but happy men.

Flaming Grass Draws Enemy Fire

Two other fliers came to Udorn on trips they had not expected to make—Capt. Tracy Dorsett and Captain Corder, whom I mentioned earlier. Their F-4D Phantom II was leading a strike on an airbase northwest of Hanoi in February, 1968, when both engines and the fuel system were damaged by anti-aircraft fire.

"I thought at first," said Captain Corder, "that we could rendezvous with a KC-135 and refuel, but we were burning it up too fast. Tracy asked me to look for an ejection



EXACHROME, U. S. NAVY

spot, and we headed for the highest and roughest terrain we could find. I punched out first and Tracy followed. We went down into trees that must have been 150 feet high, but my chute snagged on a small tree, and I was left hanging only six inches above the ground."

Captain Dorsett, the aircraft commander, told me that his chute went through the trees without catching, and he spilled down a steep slope of knee-deep grass and vines. He found himself on a ridge line about a mile from Corder. A well-traveled road skirted the area; both men knew that meant trouble.

Their wingman, circling overhead, alerted rescue headquarters. Sandys were on the scene in 15 minutes, followed by Buffs from Udorn.

When Dorsett set a flare to mark his position, he accidentally set the grass around him on fire. As the smoke billowed up, North

Vietnamese troops on the road started firing toward it. One of the Udorn Buffs closed in and returned the fire while another made the pickup of Corder (pages 360-63).

That was when Corder hung onto the penetrator so hard they almost had to pry it out of his hands. The pickup of Dorsett followed.

Few Jobs So Satisfying

When the history of the Viet Nam war is written, there should be a place in it for the air-rescue drama and the words of Air Force Capt. Jerrold D. Ward:

"Your first pickup," he told me, "is really something—to look back and see the smile on that guy's face. There are very few jobs devoted to saving men's lives, and this is one of them. I may never do anything else in my life that is so satisfying."

THE END