

Hand-Juggled Jungle Penetrator - Down Through The Canopies Against The Karst

I was the flight engineer on the Jolly that pulled Sparky [Bill Sparks] out of Indian Country in Viet Nam. Attached is my version of the rescue I wrote for the Jolly Green Web page in 1997 in honor of the 31th anniversary of Bill Spark's rescue.

Flying the Jolly Green HH-3E rescue helicopter in south East Asia can best be described as hours upon hours of boredom waiting for some poor fighter jock to get his ride blown out from under him. This was the norm with the occasional adrenaline rushes during the [Search And Rescue] SAR operations.

November 5th, 1967 started out as one of those boring days. I had been on landing-strip alert at Lima Site 36 in northern Laos for two days. It was late afternoon, and I was sitting on the Jolly's aft ramp just day dreaming about my ' Freedom Bird ride ' that was only thirty-two days away . . when all hell broke loose !

At 15:31 [Rescue Control] Crown 2 called alerting us that Red Dog Lead [F105F Wild Weasel Pilot Major Richard Dutton and Navigator Capt. Earl Cobeil] and Marlin Lead [an F105 flown by Captain Bill Sparks] were all in trouble over North Viet Nam. Crown 2 told us both crews had now punched out in locations currently unknown.

Eight minutes later we were launched and we were directed to a holding point on the North Viet Nameese (NVN) border. Jolly 56 was the low bird and Jolly 37 was high [the high bird was rescue backup.] With less than 2 hours 15 minutes until sun down there were three jocks were on the ground . . and our adrenaline was flowing fast.

Shortly after lift-off, Crown 2 called again and gave us the latitude and longitude of the rescue locations for Red Dog Lead and for Marlin Lead. They directed us to proceed to Marlin Lead's location first. About 35 minutes later, Compass [Rescue Command and Control, Saigon] directed us to become the primary low bird.

Our flight enroute at 7,500 feet was close to a scattered cloud layer to avoid ground fire and to offer us protective cover from bad guy aircraft. So far, the trip, was uneventful and could have been called ' textbook.' But back then, we were still in process of ' writing the textbook.'

We arrived at Marlin Lead's rescue location at 1650. Sandy Lead immediately directed us in for the pickup and simultaneously radioed Marlin Lead, down there in the foliage, to ' pop his smoke' .

We spotted smoke about halfway down a steep ridge about 2 clicks (kilometers) at one thirty (o'clock) off our nose. We jettisoned our drop tanks and headed for the smoke. Over the smoke, we entered a hover and I started the rescue hoist rolling and our pendulum shaped rescue penetrator slid down into the canopies of tall trees.

The jungle foliage was thick. I couldn't see the ground or the survivor. All I could see was . . what looked like . . the end of a survival flare waving at me from somewhere down deep in the foliage.

Radio chatter was like nothing I had ever heard before. It seemed like every one was on the radio screaming at once with their squelch buttons set at maximum intensity.

Then, our confusion and pucker meters then pegged out as radio communication between Jolly 37 and the orbiting Sandy Lead went tits up. Sandy Lead had been trying to tell us we were on the wrong smoke. His transmissions to us were broken up and we couldn't talk to him.

Finally, our partner Jolly 56 holding high over a near-by karst rock ridge, relayed Sandy Lead's radio calls to us. So I pulled up the penetrator and we headed out over the karst ridge where Sandy Lead was orbiting near the second smoke.

We flew toward and over the second smoke. Because of the heavy foliage, we couldn't see this survivor either. After we passed over his location, he fired his pen gun flare, but it ignited behind us and we didn't see it.

But when we got turned around we immediately saw two more pen gun flares as they shot up through the dense tree canopies.

About this time I briefly spotted the survivor about three quarters of the way up a steep karst slope. Briefly, he stood up in a small four by four foot clearing, then disappeared into the dense foliage. Even though I could no longer see the survivor I persuaded our pilot, Captain Walker, into making a lower hover over the small clearing.

Due to the steep angle of the karst slope, we had been in a very high hover, with the helicopter's rescue door facing the steep slope. I'm thinking . . . why the hell isn't this guy standing out there in that little clearing ?

Is this is a trap ?

I ran the rescue penetrator down with the hoist. It kept going and going. The next thing I know . . . the orange-painted cable end is showing.

[Note : The final ten (10) feet of the 250 ft cable is painted bright orange to alert the hoist operator so he doesn't allow the cable to fall off the drum. The only thing fastening the cable on the drum is a ' set ' screw.]

*I stopped the penetrator at what looked to be about twelve feet above the where I wanted it. But I still didn't see the survivor down below. I told our pilot Captain Walker that his tail rotor was clear, and to **lower the helicopter about TEN MORE FEET** so the penetrator could reach the ground.*

*He said : " **TAKE A LOOK . . . OUT FRONT ! "***

I looked out and saw our re-fueling probe was buried up to our cockpit in an enormous tree. And our rotor tips were light beating against the top of the tree.

I slowly start lowering the hoist until the cable had only one wrap left around the drum . . . plus the little set screw. But the damn penetrator was still about (4) four feet ABOVE the ' spot '. And I still didn't see the survivor.

Now I'm wondering . . . is the survivor even down there . . . any more ? I decided to try one last move before telling Captain Walker to get us the hell out of Dodge.

I took my hand and began moving the cable to get the penetrator swinging up slope toward where I saw the survivor disappear. The penetrator swung into the foliage.

IT DIDN'T . . .

S-W-I-N-G

B-A-C-K O-U-T ! !

After about 30 seconds I felt four sharp tugs on the cable. Gently, I began winding the cable back in . . . not knowing if the set screw would accept the survivor's weight until I could get a couple wraps of cable back on the winch.

I'VE GOT THE . . . TWO WRAPS !

And then I saw the survivor ! What a relief it was . . . when I saw a huge handle bar mustache . . . with an even bigger grin . . . a man hugging the penetrator like a first and only date . . . came swinging out from beneath the foliage.

When the survivor was about 50 feet below the rescue door I spotted some ' locals' [North Vietnamese soldiers] coming over the ridge. I told Captain Walker & quote . . . ' let's get the hell out of here ! '

We rolled left, away from the ridge . . . with the survivor dangling on our 3/8" steel cable at 300 feet going about 75 knots over the valley.

With joy and fear combined . . . what a ride it must have been - on the end of that wire !

We finally got the shaken but happy survivor inside. He just lay there on the helicopter's floor . . . looking at us . . . grinning at us from ear to ear.

*Russ O'Neal
Flight Engineer, Jolly 37*