

HC-7 RESCUE 105⁽¹⁾ 16-June-1972 (Friday)

HH-3A Sikorsky Seaking helo Det 110 Big Mother 61⁽⁶⁾
USS ?? Combat Day⁽²⁾
7 miles off North Vietnam coast

Pilot – LT	James S. Kelly
Co-pilot - LTJG	Early H. Frazier
1st crew – ADJ-2	Richard J. Tinsley
2nd crew – ADJ-3	Jimmy C. Keeney
3rd crew – LCDR	Edwin Towers – observer (O-in-C Op

Thunderhead - code name “Black Beard”)

RF-8G Crusader 145613 (Baby Giant 601) Detachment 3, VFP-63, USN,
USS Midway (CVA-41)

Lt. Paul Ringwood (nmn)

An RF-8G Crusader was damaged by AAA as it attempted to obtain photographs of the Thanh Hoa Bridge which had been severely damaged on 27 April and 13 May by Phantoms from the 8th TFW using Paveway LGBs. The Crusader was in a turn at 4,500 and 450 knots when it was hit by 37mm flak. The aft section of the aircraft was set on fire and Lt Ringwood headed out to sea and ejected about 10 miles off the coast. He was quickly rescued by a Navy HH-3 SAR helicopter.⁽⁵⁾

“17:25 F-8 pilot reported ejected 300° T 77 miles from MIDWAY position 18°59.5’N 107° 14.8’E LT RINGWOOD 17:55 Plane lost F-8 pilot LT RINGWOOD VFP-63 #601, Bur No. 145613.”⁽¹¹⁾

“Hope for Freedom” Operation Thunderhead - Chapter 14⁽⁶⁾

Pilot Down -- Vicinity Thanh Hoa

The days following the departure of the SEALs and UDTs seemed to go by rapidly. The monotony of flying into the surveillance area several times daily turned it into a "milk run". We

all knew the coastline so well we could tell approximately how many boats would be in the next inlet, or how many would be in Thanh Hoa Bay, depending on the time of day or day of the week. Our concern about flying over land to check out a piece of red or yellow cloth hanging in a rice field turned out to be as routine as landing aboard the ship. We would spend hours in question and answer sessions of what we would do if we were an escaped POW trying to keep out of sight from the North Vietnamese, find a boat and maneuver the boat down the rivers to the Gulf. It was amazing the kinship we felt with the POWs.

Each day I would ask Earle if he had heard anything from his people regarding the POWs and each day his reply was negative. It was obvious he would give anything to be able to come up with some new information for us. We rehearsed daily, in our minds, the radio report, "Lone Eagle, this is Big Mother. FLASHBACK SIERRA . . ." followed by four numbers for the coordinates. Our desire to report that we had positively sighted the POWs and were in the process of rescuing them was the only thing which made the latter days of the operation meaningful.

On June 16th we had scheduled the same series of flights. However, this time we would remain airborne after one of the runs and reenter the Hour Glass a second time an hour later.

Occasionally we had been called upon to transfer personnel or high priority logistics if there were no other helos available. No one minded the extra flying time - it was the least we could do to justify our existence! Since strike aircraft routinely operated near our surveillance area, we normally kept one of the radios tuned to their frequency. However, since strike SAR coverage was not our primary responsibility, we weren't too concerned about it.

Our first run was complete. As Jim Kelly was bringing us toward the center of the Gulf for the one hour holding period before a second run into the Hour Glass, he said, "How about it, Ed, you wanna try to fly this thing?"

"Do you trust me?" I replied without hesitation.

"No sweat. We've taught dumber guys than you to fly these things," Earl commented.

Then Keeney chimed in, "Sure have, and you're trusting your life to some of them right here!"

Earl grinned. Everyone in the helo was relaxed. It was good taking a break from the serious routine to have a little fun. Jim unbuckled and climbed out of the right seat. Earl would fly from the left seat until I became comfortable with it. Jim would stand behind the two of us and give me the necessary instructions. It seemed to take an extreme amount of time for Jim to get out of the seat. For awhile I thought he was making it look difficult intentionally . . . maybe he was having second thoughts about me flying the helo. Finally he got out. As he plugged his mike into one of the side units, he said, "These armor-plated seats are a pain in the neck. They're good protection if we're shot at, but trying to get in and out while airborne is really a bear!"

I found out what he meant as I started to climb in. The body just didn't seem to bend in the right places if you were anything less than a contortionist. Finally, I made it! I was now sitting in the pilot's seat of the helo. Jim showed me how to buckle-up and how to handle the controls. He started with the fuel controls, up high in the center of the windshield. He had me turn them very gradually to see how it would affect the helo flight and the various instruments. He showed me how the rudder pedals changed the pitch on the tail rotor, causing the tail of the aircraft to go right or left. Then the last two, the cyclic, which was between my legs and the collective, to the

left of the seat. I gripped the cyclic with my right hand. A forward or back motion caused a change in the helo pitch. The collective I gripped with my left hand which changed the blade pitch on the five large blades, which cause the helo to go faster or to climb as the blades took larger "bites of air". It all seemed fairly clear. I knew there were many details he didn't bother with - so not to confuse me. Earl reluctantly eased his grip from the controls on his side of the cockpit and said, "O.K., you got it!?"

I didn't respond since that required pressing the mike button with my left thumb. I wasn't sure my hand, arm and brain were all working together just yet -let alone my thumb! Eventually I began to get the feel of the helo and changed the controls gradually, one at a time to be sure of the response each created. I was finally able to master the button for the ICS as well and said, "Hey; this is really neat! I wish I had gone this route, instead of becoming a Naval Flight Officer."

Earl turned to me and said, "You mean you're not a pilot?"

I glanced over at him and noticed his hands returning to the controls. He hadn't taken them - but he was "covering me", just in case.

Jim came on the ICS with a chuckle and said, "You'll have to forgive Earl, he's a white-knuckle flyer." Then tapping Earl on the shoulder he continued, "Don't worry, he's doing fine."

It was beginning to feel like I had a pretty good handle on this straight and level flight. As I was about to attempt some changes of the collective and cyclic, we received a radio transmission.

"This is Doughboy, on Guard. We have a pilot down, vicinity Thanh Hoa! There have been no visuals or beeper since his aircraft was hit! Are any SAR units up? Come up on Guard! Over."

Earl immediately responded, "Doughboy, this is Big Mother Six-One on Guard. We're available. Can you provide coordinates? Over."

At this point we weren't certain who "Doughboy" was, but that wasn't important. The big concern was whether they wanted us to head in and whether anyone had spotted the pilot. I knew I had to get out of that right seat so Jim could get back in to fly the helo for a pickup! I also knew it was going to take time, just like it did for the first switch! Every time I started to move there was another radio transmission. Jim motioned for me to stay put until we were sure what was going on.

"Big Mother, this is Doughboy. I have a Blackhawk aircraft up on Lone Eagle's primary check-in. He says he's spotted the pilot. Can you come up that freq for SAR coordination? Over."

Earl responded, "Big Mother Six-One, roger, switching."

Glancing down at his knee board, Earl flipped a page and found the primary check-in frequency for the PIRAZ ship. He dialed it in and transmitted, "Lone Eagle, this is Big Mother Six-One on your . . . (he hesitated for a second while checking the TACAN bearing and range) . . . on your Zero One-Zero, fifty miles. Available for SAR duties. Over."

I felt so helpless! I couldn't get out of the seat without bumping and climbing over controls. That would cause Earl even more problems. He was working like a one-armed paper hanger, flying

and talking! Finally, PIRAZ responded, "Big Mother Six-One, this is Lone Eagle. Roger your last. We have Blackhawk up this freq for SAR coordination. Your steer into the area is Two-Five-Zero, sixty. Over."

We had been on a westerly course all the time, knowing the action would be in that direction. I had continued my grip on the controls, a very minor assist to Earl while he took care of everything. Now that we had our steer, we were on our way! Earl said very firmly, "I've got it."

There was no doubt about it, now was the time for me to *MOVE!* It seemed like the seat worked against me. The faster I tried to get out, the slower I seemed to move! After several minutes that seemed like an hour, I was finally loose. Unfortunately I was turned around, struggling not to step on or bump the controls. Jim came over the ICS, "Hang on tight, Earl, I'm gonna give Ed a little help!"

I didn't know what that meant, but I was grateful for any help I could get. He reached up with his right arm, wrapped it around my left shoulder and, with one horrendous jerk, pulled me straight aft! I ended up in the middle of the helo on my knees. I would have been on my stomach but the mike cord was still plugged in and put a limit on the distance my head traveled from the cockpit. Jim smiled, apologized and with considerably more ease than I had exiting, got back in the right seat. Earl told Jim how far we were from the area and said, "This one looks like it might be on the beach."

We continued inbound until the Blackhawk aircraft saw us. He told us where the downed pilot was and said he would have to depart immediately. He was low on fuel. He had last seen something in the water about two hundred yards from the beach. An RF-8 aircraft had been hit by ground fire, but proceeded another mile farther out to sea before exploding. No one actually saw a parachute, so they were not certain they were looking at the pilot.

There was an airfield near Thanh Hoa, about ten miles from the area we would be searching. With the Blackhawk aircraft departing, we were on our own again. This area was only ten miles south of our Thanh Hoa Bay surveillance area, which would make the search a little easier for us. If there was triple A heavy enough to shoot down a fast, maneuverable RF-8, we would be a sitting duck. We would just have to chance it! The part I didn't like was the possible MiG threat, I told Jim the PIRAZ ship could take control of the BARCAP and bring them over to our general vicinity. This would give some coverage, but they might not be able to stop a MiG from making a hit and run attack on us. He wouldn't get a chance for a second one with the BARCAP being nearby! The helo crew wasn't familiar with the fighter assets available in the Gulf but my idea sounded reasonable to them. By the time we arrived in the SAR area, LONG BEACH had BARCAP there too. We were set for an extended search. Jim had flown slightly to the right of the vector and approached the coastline a mile north of the last reported position. He turned south and flew right along the coast. Tinsley was checking the beach as Keeney and I manned the port hatches. Jim and Earl sighted lots of small fishing boats coming out from the coastal town of Sam Son. We saw which way they were heading and spotted the pilot in the water about a mile ahead of them. These people were not only good fishermen, but were obviously fair "fishers of men"!

Jim swung the helo toward the downed pilot. We didn't know if he would be alive or not since no one had seen his chute. Tinsley rigged the horse collar and swung it out the cargo door. Keeney and I stepped over to the starboard side of the aircraft to assist. If necessary, Keeney would be going into the water. As we began the hover, we could tell the pilot was still alive! He wasn't moving much but his life jacket was inflated, so he was obviously mobile. He was able to

place the collar over his head and under his arms but in a mechanical fashion. Tinsley pressed the hoist button and brought him up.

During the rescue, we heard MiG calls on Guard. Rough estimates of the coordinates they were giving placed the MiGs south of Hanoi, but their direction of travel was constantly changing. One call indicated movement toward us, the next indicated they had reversed course. Evidently the F-4s on BARCAP were too great a threat for them to chance an attack on us!

The flotilla of small boats was very close but wasn't shooting at us. They were, no doubt, disappointed to have been cheated out of their "incentive pay". We had the pilot at the deck edge of the helo and told Jim to clear the area. Keeney and I reached down, each taking an arm. As we pulled him aboard, we could tell he was in shock. We were concerned that he might have broken bones and not be aware of them because of the shock, so we had him lie down. He told us which carrier he was from and Jim headed for it. Tinsley checked him over for broken bones or bleeding but found neither. He had ejected at a low altitude so his chute didn't open. Somehow he had been able to get free of the chute and shroud lines before they sank and dragged him down with them. The crew covered him with a blanket from the back of the helo as we helped him up onto the canvas bench. Tinsley started the inevitable paperwork and noted the name on his flight suit was LT RINGWOOD. **(HC-7 Rescue 105)** We called him by name and determined that he was sufficiently coherent to answer some questions.

When we landed on the carrier, corpsmen were waiting on the flight deck with the stretcher. Because he was in shock, they insisted he lie in the stretcher. He was then hurried off to sick bay. Two rescues, but neither were escaped POWs!

Jim received departure clearance from Air Ops and we headed for LONG BEACH. Enroute I noticed the Seventh Fleet flagship, my normal "home away from home", OKLAHOMA CITY, had returned to the Gulf. They had been in for nearly a week. For some reason the thought occurred to me that if anyone was going to write up recommendations for awards for Operation Thunderhead, it would have to be me. Everyone else was providing support and would expect whoever was in charge to generate the paperwork. I wasn't sure how to originate awards but knew that COMSEVENTH Fleet Staff had approval authority for some awards. Surely they could tell me what I needed. I asked Jim to call the OKIE CITY and see if we could come aboard for an hour while I got this information. He obtained the clearance and soon we were sitting down on their helo pad.

Captain McKenzie would know who I should talk to and would also be very helpful in the review process once I submitted them. I headed straight for his office from the helo pad. Glancing through the porthole in his office door, I could see there was no one with him so I just knocked and opened the door. To my surprise, it was Captain Russell, not Captain McKenzie!

"Uh, excuse me, Captain. Is Captain McKenzie around?"

"Well hello, Ed," he responded. "No, we left Captain McKenzie in port when we got under way this time. His transfer, remember?"

My disappointment must have shown! I had no reason to doubt Captain Russell's ability to assist me, but I had missed my chance to say goodbye to Captain McKenzie! There was nothing I could do about it now, so I told Captain Russell what I needed. He seemed somewhat reluctant to speak about award recommendations but finally told me who was in charge of them.

This person could tell me what data was required. I got the information, stopped in Strike Ops to say hello, then headed back to the helo. It was an unusual feeling - being aboard the OKIE CITY was like being "at home", at the same time I felt that I didn't belong. I wasn't sure why, but supposed it was because the staff was totally engrossed in their part of the war and I was engrossed in a different part.

Soon we lifted off and headed back toward LONG BEACH. We still had time to go aboard for a few minutes, refuel, check Flag Plot for any new info and head back into the surveillance area for one last flight for the day.

We were past the last of the primary recovery dates (15 June) and were entering the last three days of Operation Thunderhead. On the 17th and 18th we kept up the same tempo of operations but always returned with nothing to report. Disappointment grew with the termination of each flight. If only there was some way to know for sure, had they actually tried to escape?

Today was the 19th of June, the last day of the mission. If we found nothing today, we would have to terminate the operation and return all personnel and assets to their original duties. The morning started with Craig and his crew arriving at 0800. We had planned only two flights, one in the morning and one in the mid-afternoon, Craig and his entire crew agreed that we would check every piece of red or yellow cloth, no matter where. We would not make any feints past a sighting, but would fly straight into one! There was no need to be concerned about the North Vietnamese knowing our primary areas of interest, so we headed directly for the Hour Glass. We entered the area of Thanh Hoa Bay and saw nothing. The Hour Glass had plenty of boats, but none responded properly as we approached. We were very much aware that we were well within their air defense envelope, but we were going to leave no stone unturned today. To our surprise, the guns remained silent. We were fully prepared to return fire, but there was not a single occasion, which warranted it! Very strange, but we were grateful!

We completed the first run and returned by 1100. There was plenty of time to have lunch, unwind and prepare for one last run this afternoon. As we disembarked, Bill exclaimed, "You know, it seems like another run of the same type this afternoon would be useless!"

He was voicing an opinion, but no one responded. Even though his observation was valid, there was still the long shot that this flight could be it. We had planned the operation for the final flight to be late afternoon, the 19th of June. It may have been useless, but the afternoon flight would go as scheduled.

The four hour wait seemed interminable. The entire helo crew had been to Flag Plot CIC several times during the afternoon; each man asking irrelevant questions to justify his presence and to hide his edginess. *Finally* it was 1500, time to preflight the helo and start the engines. The crew was early and we sat on the deck with the engines running for nearly ten minutes before departure. The ship granted a five minute early departure when Bill requested it.

"Might as well get airborne," Craig said. "We can't do anything sitting here."

With that, we launched for the last surveillance run of Operation Thunderhead.

Again, we proceeded toward the Hour Glass first. It was as though they had been expecting this to be our last run.

There were practically no boats in sight, either on Thanh Hoa Bay or in the estuaries of the Hour Glass. Someone commented about the ominous appearance of the waterways with so few boats. I kept thinking that maybe we were tempting fate just once too often! What if the bad guys had finally decided to lay the trap for us in order to rid themselves of this daily nuisance? There were any number of locations which they could do it. What if there was a defense site which they didn't want discovered that we had stumbled upon? They were constantly moving SAM sites around to surprise our attack aircraft. What if . . . ?

As we continued up the coastline with the same degree of tenacity and disregard for the North - Vietnamese airspace over the past three weeks, the questions remained in my mind-what if ...? I remembered my cruises aboard USS CORAL SEA in the E-2 squadron. There were at least four distinct occasions when we lost either aircraft or crew during a last mission; a pilot's last mission before being transferred to shore duty; the last flight of the cruise for a pilot before we departed for home; and once, a midair between an E-2 and an A-7 at the end of the cruise. Could the same thing happen to us? Every time the feeling built up inside me, another thought would flood my mind to bring peace and calmness. It was a statement made to me during a church reunion several years earlier.

My wife, two children and I had attended the reunion just before I left on a seven month deployment. Georgia and I were both anxious about this deployment due to the significant aircraft losses the Navy had suffered during recent months. Losses not only due to the normal hazards of flying from a carrier, but from the hostile fire of the North Vietnamese. We had not mentioned this anxiety to anyone. During the prayer service, a minister of the church stood and spoke. He turned and directed his statements to Georgia and me. His voice had tonal inflections which were not those of the man I knew so well. He spoke words of counsel and encouragement. He told us that we were not to fear, that I would encounter many hazards but the hand of the Lord would protect me. I would survive the trials of this conflict and be returned home safely to my family. It was a promise from the Lord which no man could lay claim to! It was not an excuse for me to be reckless, but rather a promise on which to build my faith and to give me courage in my time of need!

Our final flight through the northern branches of the Red River was uneventful. We had completed the last surveillance run. There was a little hesitation before Craig turned the helo around and started back down the coast. He slowed down as we approached the sand bar at the mouth of the main branch of the Red River. There for our viewing was one long, beautiful, white sandy beach. I think everyone felt we had been watched over in some miraculous way. Here was a beach so beautiful that surely no one could say this place was hostile! Mac quickly broke the mood. He reached into the aft section of the helo and brought out a large bucket. It had evidently been left in the helo when they were trying to get rid of the salt water several days earlier. He shouted, "Hey, Mister Peterson. Set her down right here and I'll grab a bucket of that North Vietnamese sand! We can sell it back aboard the carrier and make a fortune! What da ya say?"

I wasn't sure if he was serious or kidding. There was no doubt in my mind that sailors aboard the carrier would pay good money for a sample of North Vietnamese sand-they have spent their pay for dumber things than that! Somehow the idea just didn't strike my fancy.

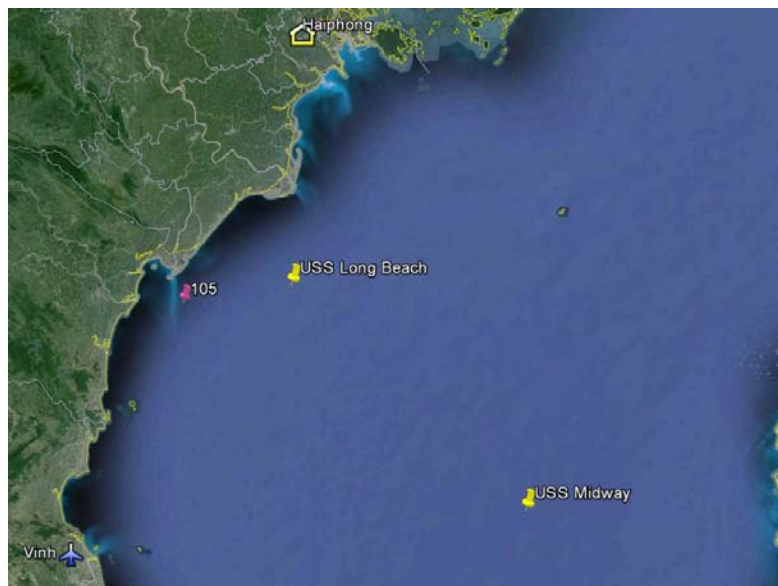
"We're through with Operation Thunderhead, Craig, but if you were planning to take a vote, I'm against taking the chance of sucking sand up into our engines so we could have someone come rescue US!"

Craig just laughed, "Ed, don't pay any attention to Mac. He pulls those practical jokes every once in awhile.

I never did know if Mac really meant it. The conversation changed to other things as we continued back toward LONG BEACH.

Statement after-report of Jim Keeney (2004) ⁽¹⁰⁾

We did not know this fellow was shot down, until one of the ship's told us he was down, we never heard anything on Guard. Anyway, we went down to where he was supposed to be and sure enough, there he was in his raft. LT Kelly flared and Tinsley tapped me OFF. I went into the water and pulled him out of the raft, put him in the horse collar, up and off we went.



- 1) Numbering as per HC-7 Rescue Log (accumulative rescue number)
- 2) HC-7 Rescue Log
- 3) HC-7 Det 110 Rescue report – NONE on file
- 4) Map – Google Earth
- 5) "Vietnam - Air Losses" By: Chris Hobson (with permission)
- 6) "Hope for Freedom" "Operation Thunderhead" by Edwin L. Towers - LCDR USN Retired
- 7) Loss aircraft location data provided by: W. Howard Plunkett (LtCol USAF, retired)
- 10) HC-7 History collection; Ron Milam – Historian
- 11) USS Midway – Deck Log

(Compiled / written by: Ron Milam, HC-7 Historian - HC-7, 2-1969 to 7-1970, Det 108 & 113)

