

HC-7 RESCUE 120⁽¹⁾ 11-Sep-1972 (Monday)

HH-3A Sikorsky Seaking helo Det 110 Big Mother #61
USS England (DLG-22) Combat Day ⁽²⁾
24 miles off North Vietnam coast – 7.5 miles from island
Water: 83° Air: 85° Wind: 5 knots Sea State: calm 1 foot swells

Pilot – LT	James C. Spillman
Co-pilot - LTJG	Jeffery S. Lewis
1st crew – ADJ-2	Timothy M. McCarthy
2nd crew – ADJ-2	Robert J. Ford

Rescue Report; ⁽²⁾

Alert Received - 18:15 – radio / ATK frequency – Radio Comm / Cluttered Freq.
Vehicle Departed – 18:16 - 15 miles, Lack of positive position
Arrived on Scene – 18:25
Located Survivor – 18:26 – Visual location of oil slick and parachutes
Begin Retrieval – 18:27 - Drop swimmer to survivors
Ended Retrieval – 18:30 - Hoist used to pick-up swimmer/survivors
Survivor Disembarked – 18:52 Aboard ship – USS England (DLG-22)
Total SAR time – this vehicle – 55 minutes.

F-4J Phantom (AJ-201) (Shamrock 201) ⁽⁶⁾ 155526 (Fighting Shamrocks)
VMFA-333, USMC,
USS America (CVA-66)

Maj	Lee T. Lasseter
Capt	John D. Cummings

F-4J Phantom (AJ-206) (Shamrock 206) ⁽⁶⁾ 154784 (Fighting Shamrocks)
VMFA-333, USMC,
USS America (CVA-66)

Capt Andrew Scot Dudley (survived) rescued by SH-2D – Hard Charger 15 (LAMPS)
1 Lt James W. Brady (survived) (see HC-7 rescue 121)

One of the two Phantom squadrons on board the USS America on its third and final combat cruise was VMFA-333 of the US Marine Corps. This was the only occasion when a Marine Corps Phantom squadron had deployed on board a carrier for duty in the war. On 11 September VMFA-333 provided a CAP flight of two F-4Js for a major strike on the Co Giang SAM assembly depot. During the mission, the CAP flight engaged several MiGs and Maj 'Bear' Lasseter, the Squadron's executive officer, and Capt Cummings shot down a MiG-21 and damaged another near Phuc Yen airfield. The air battle had left the pair of F-4s short of fuel and they had to fly directly over Haiphong on their way to the Gulf and a waiting tanker. The air began to fill with SAMs and flak bursts and, despite evasive action, Maj Lasseter's Phantom was hit by an SA-2 at 15,000 feet damaging the wing and causing the aircraft to burst into flames. Eventually hydraulic failure led to loss of control and the crew ejected over the Gulf about 35 miles southeast of Haiphong, from where they were rescued by an HH-3A of HC-7 operating from the USS England.

Maj Lasseter's wingman was also hit as he flew over Haiphong on the way out to sea. Capt Dudley's aircraft was hit by flak in the wing and fuselage causing a massive fuel leak. The engines flamed out from lack of fuel when the aircraft was about 45 miles south of Haiphong and the crew joined their colleagues in the Gulf and were rescued by the SAR destroyer USS Biddle. All four men returned to the carrier with barely a scratch to celebrate the only all-Marine Corps MiG-kill of the war. Maj Lasseter took command of VMFA-333 on Christmas Eve when Lt Col Cochran was shot down.⁽⁵⁾

STATEMENT OF: LT James C. SPILLMAN

?????? Approximately 40 miles north of Oswald & May Day call from a crippled aircraft was sounded over the strike frequency. I gave control of the aircraft to my co-pilot, LTJG Lewis, while I attempted to get an ADF out of the distress call. Oswald requested at this time for us to return to Oswald for a hot pump. Our fuel state was 1+30, so I acknowledged the request as I continued to pinpoint the doomed aircraft's position. Switching to the Strike Emergency, I contacted the damaged aircraft's wingman who called his position 035°/52 off Red Crown. This put him east of us at what I estimated to be less than 20 miles. We turned to 090' and within minutes, I sighted what appeared to be an oil slick at our two o'clock position approximately 10 miles.

As we headed directly for the slick, I sighted one of the survivor's parachutes landing a few hundred yards west-of the oil slick. I informed Rescue that we had both pilots insight and were making our approach at this time. Unfortunately, the radios were extremely cluttered because two aircraft were downed in the same general area.

Having not received enemy fire from the nearby islands, I made a controlled 10' and 10' knots approach to the first survivor. Upon reaching 10' of altitude above the downed pilot, my swimmer, ADJ2 Ford, entered the water. While the swimmer prepared the first survivor for pickup, I flew directly toward the second survivor, who was at our twelve o'clock position approximately 200 yards. The second survivor clung to his raft as we flew over him in order to determine his condition prior to returning to the first survivor. After receiving the signal for pickup from the swimmer, I made my second approach to the first survivor. Upon reaching a 30' hover, First Crewman McCarthy skillfully directed me over the survivor despite a malfunctioning hoist and intermittent ICS. With both swimmer and first pilot safely aboard, I broke hover and proceeded to the second survivor. ADJ2 Ford reentered water at 10' above the water to assist the second pilot, as we again departed the immediate area because of the high probability of enemy fire from the nearby islands. Upon receiving the pickup signal from the swimmer, the approach and pickup of the second survivor was made without further complications.

With both survivors aboard, I contacted Rescap informing him I had the pilots of Shamrock 201 aboard and was proceeding to Oswald for fuel and medical assistance. The condition of the pilots was determined satisfactory prior to our landing aboard the USS England (DLG-22).

CO-PILOT: LTJG JEFFREY S. LEWIS

At approximately 1800, 11 September 1972, we were in Big Mother 61 on a preposition under Oswald's control. We were covering a strike on targets around the Haiphong area when we heard over attack primary that Shamrock 201 (from the America) had been hit by a SAM and was proceeding feet wet. Big Mother 71, covering the same preposition, was given a vector of 050° by Oswald, to cover Shamrock 201 in case he had to eject. We were told by Oswald to return for a hot pump. At this time Oswald informed us that 201 appeared to be making it okay. Shortly after we turned back toward Oswald, we heard one of 201's wingman say that 201 was on fire and that crew was punching out.

At this time, we turned back and the pilot of 61, Jim SPILLMAN, contacted 201's wingman to get a position on the downed pilots. The wingman gave us a position of 035/52 off of Red Crown's tacan. He also reported two good chutes. We were then on Red Crown's 330/39. Enroute to the downed pilot's position, Jim reported seeing an oil slick, and as he turned toward it we saw two chutes hit the water near the slick. We weren't taking any hostile fire so Jim made a slow approach to the first survivor and our swimmer, ADJ2 FORD, jumped into the water to help him. We then over flew the second survivor, saw that he was all right, and proceeded back around to pick up the first survivor. Our first crewman, ADJ2 MCCARTHY, directed us to a hover over the first survivor, and we picked him and our swimmer up. When we got back to the second survivor, Jim brought the aircraft to a low hover and let our swimmer out to assist him. As we made an orbit around our swimmer and survivor, Big Mother 71 arrived on the scene to assist us if we needed them. After we picked up the second survivor and our swimmer, we proceeded to Oswald (the USS ENGLAND) and left the two survivors there. They both had sustained a few cuts and bruises, but were in pretty good shape.

Two main problems we had during the rescue were our hoist and the crewman's ICS. We had a hydraulic failure with the hoist and McCARTHY had to use the manual override. MCCARTHY also said that we were barely audible over his ICS, but we had no difficulty in hearing him,

Statement of 1st Crewman : TIMOTHY M. MCCARTHY

I was in Big Mother 61. We were on a preposition and all aircraft were coming feet wet when we heard of a bird in trouble to the north. Big Mother 71 and 61 got vectors to the aircraft. Then we heard of a Mayday on our tail, an aircraft was on fire and the crew was punching out. We got new vectors and reversed our heading. The swimmer Bob FORD was getting into his gear. The pilots LT SPILLMAN, LTJG LEWIS was getting ready for the pickup. I was rigging the hoist. As I started the hoist down, a small hydraulic leak over my head appeared and fluid was spraying all over the place, then the hoist quit. I checked it for a jam and asked the pilot to check the crew switch and circuit breaker. The circuit breaker had popped. They put it back in and every time I touched the hoist, it would pop again, no matter whether I was in hydraulic or electric override. I decided I was going to have to use the manual override.

Now the pilots saw two chutes enter the water on our nose about 4 miles on front of us. I gave the pilots a wind check and it was on our nose. We were on final. Both men looked okay and had their rafts deployed so we dropped the swimmer on the first one. Did a race track break to the right and got the splashing signal. We went in for pick-up.

The approach and hover were great and the swimmer was fast. The men were in the aircraft. The swimmer unhooked and _????_ to the door so we could get the next guy. We air taxied over to him dropped down and made the drop. Waved off and did a race track we got the splashing signal and again went in for the pickup. Again, the approach and hover were good and the swimmer hooked up fast.

Now the hoist started to go intermittent, it would go and stop. I got the two men to the door and then I tried to pull the men to the door and when I tried to pull them, I fell down because of the water and hydraulic fluid. I hoisted them up again and again I fell but this time I just pulled them in on top of me. We broke off and headed for Oswald.

On the way there, we got the two survivors out of their gear and checked them for injury. They seem to be fine except for some cuts on their face and red eyes that they said was caused by ????.

Statement by 2nd Crewman: ADJ2 ROBERT J. FORD

It was approximately 1700 when we lifted of Red Crown to cover an air strike over North Vietnam. After receiving our vectors and arriving on station we flew our routine pattern.

The radios were pretty quiet until about 1815 when we got a call that there was a bird in trouble. We got vectors and proceeded along with Big Mother 71 to the downed pilot. Just a few minutes later, we got word that another aircraft was hit by a SAM and was on fire.

The pilot punched out and their position was at our 6 o'clock. We swung around and took up our new heading.

After jumping into my swim gear, I took up watch out the port side of the aircraft. The pilots LT SPILLMAN and LTJG LEWIS saw the chutes in the water at our twelve o'clock approximately four miles. I scrambled to the cargo door and awaited the go signal from the 1st crewman ADJ2 Tim McCarthy.

Three taps and I was in the water. The entry felt good. I swam over to the survivor, check on his condition and his shroud lines and then sunk his raft. I gave the splash signal to Big Mother 61 and hooked up with no trouble on his return. After entering the aircraft and freeing myself of the hoist, I returned to the cargo door awaiting another jump. The second entry again felt good. Upon reaching the second survivor the first thing that he said was; "those fucking SAM's". I checked on the condition and shroud lines and then sunk his raft. While preparing for hook-up I found that I lost my snap ring somewhere in the scramble. I gave the splash signal to 61 again. On hooking-up the lost snap ring caused maybe a five to ten second delay. While being hoisted, I noticed a couple of stop and goes of the hoist. We entered the aircraft with slight difficulty due to a hydraulic leak.

The first crewman and I got the survivors seated and checked their condition while enroute to Oswald. End of rescue.



- 1) Numbering as per HC-7 Rescue Log (accumulative rescue number)
- 2) HC-7 Rescue Log
- 3) HC-7 Det 110 Rescue report
- 4) Map – Google Earth
- 5) "Vietnam - Air Losses" By: Chris Hobson (with permission)
- 6) Unclassified Accident Report – B-3-70
- 7) Loss aircraft location data provided by: W. Howard Plunkett (LtCol USAF, retired)
- 10) HC-7 History collection; Ron Milam - Historian
- 12) USS Gridley – Deck Logs

Further Reference:

A. Naval Aviation News – November 1972 - page 31

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