

HC-7 RESCUE 30 ⁽¹⁾ 15-Apr-1968 (Monday)

SH-3A Sikorsky Sea-King helo “Big Mother - 72” DET 110

USS Halsey (DLG-23) Combat Day ⁽²⁾

0.6 miles off North Vietnam coast

Water: 70° Air: 78° Wind: 9 knots Sea State: 0 – wave 8 feet

Pilot – LTJG Donald L. Nicholson

Co-pilot - ENS Jeffrie E. Wiant

1st crew – AX-3 Robert M. Peters

2nd crew – ADJ-3 Jeffery S. English

Alert received – **15:22** placed on SAR alert,

Vehicle departed – **15:27** given steer of 250° distance of 25 miles,

Arrived on scene – **15:42**, determined to be bad vector, requires search for survivors

Located survivor - **15:55** receives new vector from RESCAP, hear beeper, and observe a day smoke,

Begin retrieval - **16:00** survivors are located

Ended retrieval – **16:05** rescue effected,

Survivor disembarked – **16:20** return to USS Halsey

F-4 B Phantom No. 153002 NH-202 VF-114 Fighting Aardvarks USS Kitty Hawk (CVA-63)

LCDR John F. Farnsworth

LTJG Joseph M. Sarnecky

Cocked-and-Ready - Folded-and-Stuffed ...and the Ten-and-Ten Maneuver

By; Tom Phillips, with Ron Milam, HC-7 Assoc.Historian (as seen in Fall 2013 *WINGS of GOLD* – Rescue Feature)

On 15 April 1968, as the morning Alpha Strike aircraft coasted in to Route Package III from Yankee Station to attack targets inland of the coast of North Vietnam in the general area of Vinh, four parachutes floated down into the sea just a few hundred yards from the breakers. Downed just as surely as if they had been shot down, two VF-114 Fighting Aardvarks, from USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) had suffered a midair. But that didn't stop the North Vietnamese from shooting at them once in the water.

At the South SAR (ship positioned to support rescue operations), the scramble alarm sounded aboard USS *Halsey* (DLG-23) and the 1MC called away emergency flight quarters to launch her rescue

helicopters. The crew of the "Big Mother" SH-3A Sea King raced to their grey aircraft perched on the tiny flight deck on the fantail, "cocked and ready." Quickly, the aircraft commander, LTJG Don Nicholson, arrived from CIC with the location of the SAR as copilot ENS Jeff Wi-ant hit the starter of number one engine. Aft, AX3 Robert Peters and ADJ3 Jeff English strapped in their seats for takeoff, which was seconds away. At the same time, pilots LTJGs Harry Jansen and Roger Armstrong, with crewmen ADJ3 Ernest Leagon and Airman Terry Grubbs, gathered beside their "Clementine" UH-2B, "folded and stuffed," up alongside the aft deck house, the missile magazine.

"Cocked-and-ready" meant Nicholson and Wiant had previously pre-flighted their aircraft, started the engines, engaged the rotors, tested all the systems and run all their checks. The aircraft had been then shut down with the start checklist completed up to the point of hitting the starter. Seats were properly positioned, equipment laid out, flight gear handy, everything possible done to speed the launch when the alarm was sounded. While hydraulic pressure and electrical power were on the aircraft, Peters and English had tested the hoist and inter-communication stations (ICS). They checked the guns and ammunition, laid out and arranged the rescue equipment: the horsecollar, jungle penetrator, stokes litter, flotation vests, blankets, first-aid kit, smoke markers, flares, smoke grenades, webbing cutter, shroud cutters, Chicago grip, quick splice, mask, fins, snorkel, side arms, and rescue swimmer's wet suit.

"Folded-and-stuffed" meant Jansen and Armstrong, Leagon and Grubbs, had done all the same, except they had folded the main rotor blades when complete, so their helicopter could be stuffed alongside the aft deck house to clear the flight deck so the SH-3A could land.

As soon as the SH-3A, HC-7's Det 110, Big Mother 72, lifted off, the crewmen and det maintenance personnel of HC-7 Det 109, manhandled the folded-and-stuffed UH-2B to the flight deck, spotted for takeoff, and spread the blades. Within only a couple of minutes the single engine was started, the rotor head checked, and Clementine Two also lifted off in pursuit of Big Mother, not ten minutes behind. Pretty good from folded-and-stuffed.

Cocked-and-ready and folded-and-stuffed was a necessary development of Navy combat rescue. The area of concern was the river deltas, and most of the flat, heavily populated, rice paddies and cultivated farmland, freckled with hamlets, villages, and cities, linked with a dense grid of roads and dikes. Anything of value was defended by SAMs, anti-aircraft guns, and garrisons. The elaborate road infrastructure (few paved, but still plenty of them) meant ground forces could be quickly moved into an area both to search for a downed man and to set up AAA traps for rescue forces. If rescue did not happen quickly, it probably wasn't going to happen at all, unlike when an airman went down in the more remote areas of the country, the jungle, the mountains, or the mangroves along the coast, where a pilot could hunker down and a more methodical rescue operation could be planned and executed. Every rescue was a simple race: in the populated areas, which included the coast, if the rescue forces didn't get there first, they might as well not bother going at all.

The few Navy destroyer and cruiser types with helicopter flight decks which could be risked close to the coast of heavily defended North Vietnam could only legally accommodate one helicopter. So, at first, rescue attempts were solo affairs, and, clearly back-ups were highly desired, so "folded and stuffed" quickly evolved, and never mind the regulations. You did what you had to do. Easier to ask forgiveness than ask permission.

The word was passed that two F-4 Phantoms were down (four aircrew ejected) at the same location, inland, up the Song Cua Sot, a river about 18 miles southeast of Vinh. Big Mother did not wait for Clementine, but surged ahead toward the reported position of the downed flyers. They crossed the coast at the river mouth and followed the river inland, and began taking fire right away. A mile up the river, Nicholson and Wiant received an adjusted rescue location which proved to be behind them, so they

turned around (high G turn) and flew back down the river, again running the gauntlet of the hostile fire. The new position was only 500 to 1,000 yards beyond the coast line, and as they exited the river mouth, Wiant could see men in the water. He could also see Clem Two fast approaching the scene. (Peters – several fishing boats were headed toward the pilots, laid down a long line of 30 calibers to deter them.) Shells fell in the vicinity of Clementine, the helo weaving and jinking as it closed the men. The guns were firing from a hill at the mouth of the Song Cua Sot.

Big Mother moved right in, selecting the nearest survivor, descending to ten feet and slowing so as to pass over him at about ten knots. As they passed over, "ten and ten" was passed to Peters along with "cleared to jump." Peters took one more look for obstructions in the water, and seeing none, tapped English three times on the back, the signal he was free to leave the aircraft. Away went Jeff English, feet together, flippers pointed, one arm across the chest to keep the rescue harness equipment from knocking his teeth out, and the other hand pressing the mask to the face tightly so it would not be ripped off at water entry. Big Mother kept going, accelerating up and away, and turning, to race away, in theory, drawing the hostile fire with it. Nicholson and Wiant could see Clementine performing the identical maneuver a short distance away.

Both helicopters moved from spot to spot, establishing brief hovers, dropping smoke markers, and otherwise creating false rescue sites for the gunners to consider, playing the old shell game against the shells. This recently-developed technique was dreamed up by rescue crewmen themselves to address problems they faced if using the tried and true "peacetime" procedures when under fire. The approved procedures had been to slow to a 40-foot hover over a survivor, lower the rescue swimmer down the hoist, wait in the hover for the swimmer to check over the survivor, prepare him for hoisting and attach the survivor to the hoist followed by a 40-foot ascent to the hovering helicopter. Then they were to repeat the process to recover the rescue swimmer. The new ideas spread like wildfire, with succeeding, motivated people adding tweaks and wrinkles. The ten-and-ten maneuver was implemented immediately, not waiting for formal approval.

Skyhawks arrived and dove on the shore batteries on the hill, perfectly timed to distract the gunners as both helicopters deployed their swimmers.

English's check of the survivor found him OK, and he hooked himself to the fighter crewman. Once connected, he signaled the helicopter by splashing the water. Big Mother then commenced a rapid approach, sweeping in fast, standing the helicopter on its tail to decelerate very quickly, then rocking over and wrestling the bird into a serviceable hover above the men in the water at about 10-15 feet.

Before the approach began, Peters had unwound and coiled up enough hoist cable to be able to throw it down to the two men, much faster than unspooling the cable from the hover. Another innovative time saver. One ring of a horsecollar was attached to the hook, leaving the collar open - there to keep the hook afloat and easily located. English grabbed the hook, snapped it to the swimmer rescue harness D-ring, and signaled thumbs-up to Peters, who immediately hit the up button on the hoist.

As soon as he saw the precious cargo clear the water, and saw that both men remained snugly attached, he reported. "Men clear of the water!" at which time Nicholson rocked over, pulled all the pitch he could without drooping the rotor rpm too much, and climbed the hell away from the brief hover. Swimmer and happy Phantom crewman were reeled in against the growing slipstream as the helicopter accelerated away. Wiant added one more smoke marker out the copilot window in hopes of adding one more "shell" to the game for the enemy gunners to consider.

The big helicopter moved to one of the two remaining Phantom crewmen (note – very entangled in his parachute), and they now had a moment to notice that Clementine had kept pace, their swimmer Terry Grubbs having gone to make their first rescue. The ten-and-ten technique was repeated by both helicopters, who smoothly collected the remaining two survivors. Within seconds of one another, the two rescue helicopters sped away from the hostile fire, both unscathed. Big Mother 72 and Clementine Two had achieved a rare joint success: four men rescued from the same rescue scene.

Despite the hostile fire, the rescue had gone off without a hitch, enabled by well-drilled techniques plus the perfect timing of the arrival of the critical RESCAP Skyhawks. So smooth was the rescue as to be almost routine, if dodging coastal artillery shells is your idea of a routine day. Nevertheless, this one was significant in that it was the first HC-7 Big Mother SH-3 combat rescue under fire (and the fourth HC-7 Clementine UH-2 combat rescue under fire).

These units were just getting started. They made 28 more rescues under fire, without losing a rescue man or a rescue helicopter in combat, an amazing record, and proof positive of the need for singularly dedicated combat rescue forces.

The HC-7 Sea Devils had taken responsibility for UH-2 combat rescue detachments on 1 October 1967, absorbing four UH-2A/B combat rescue detachments from HC-1 and establishing two more of their own (104 through 109). On 19 February, 1968, they created an SH-3A combat rescue detachment, Det 110, taking over the mission and signing for the five surviving combat rescue-configured Sea Kings from HS-6. Det 110 remained on station in the Gulf of Tonkin, continuously, for the next 2,045!

Det 110s "home bases" were carriers, CVs at first, until they stopped deploying in 1969, then attack carriers, jumping from ship to ship as the carriers came and went. Det 110 favored the larger decks, the *Midway* class, *Forrestal* class, *Kitty Hawk* class, and the *Enterprise*. but rode the old "27-Charlies," the *Essex* class, when required.

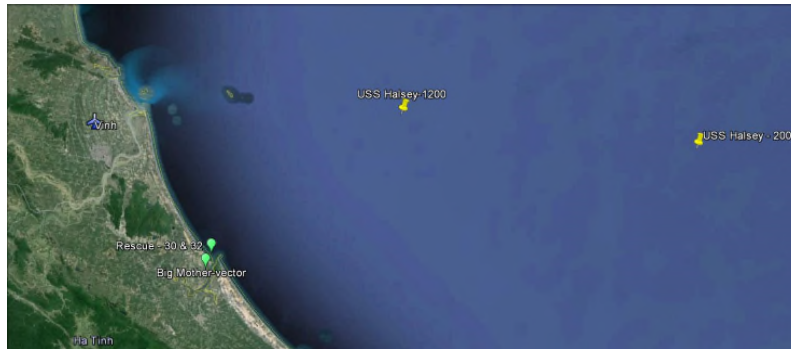
While carriers were the home bases, they staged forward virtually every day to the DLGs and cruisers of the North and South SAR, and PIRAZ (Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone - patrolled by a ship) to be in position to be as near the action as possible to rapidly respond to any downed aviators.

These "tin cans" were the regular home bases of HC-7's UH-2 dets, which stayed aboard day and night, while the Det 110 *Sea King* SH-3s returned to the carrier more often than not, especially if Alpha Strike plans allowed. Merging these two elements of HC-7 called for thinking out of the box, which resulted in folded-and-stuffed H-2s to facilitate cocked-and-ready H-3s - to accommodate two helicopters aboard a ship designed for one. This was innovation and imagination unimpeded by peacetime bureaucratic restrictions. (end)

Primary problem was accurate shelling from the beach, rescue was hindered by ASW-type hoist, second survivor was **VERY** entangled in his parachute. Coordination between SH-3A and UH-2B was outstanding. Training of swimmer and pilots was invaluable. SH-3A a ASW-type hoist substantially decreased retrieval time. Communications were good on the scene though cluttered due to fire suppression requirements. Suppression was good. ⁽³⁾



Rescue photos by: ADJ-2 William Kleimenhagen



Declassified Congratulatory Message - from USS Kitty Hawk, COMCVW-11 and all our pilots wish to express highest admiration and appreciation for superb rescue of four VF-114 aircrewmen in the afternoon of 15 April. Instantaneous aggressive response and smooth coordination are comforting proof of truly professional SAR Team on Yankee Station. The great courage and can-do spirit of Big Mother 71 and Clementine 2 crews in the face of intense enemy fire commands greatest respect and admiration of aviators on scene. Will provide supporting verification for any contemplated citation if desired. LCDR FARNSWORTH, LTJGs SARNECKY, MCCREADY, BAER convey their personal thanks.

USS Halsey (DLG-23) Deck Log: (excerpts) 15:20 SAR alert, bearing 230 at approximately 13 miles, 15:24 launch Big Mother 72, 15:30 launched Clem II, 15:55 Clem II recovered two survivors, Big Mother 72 rescued two survivors, both helos en route to Halsey. 1600-1800 Underway as before conducting SAR 16:13 recovered Clem II, with two survivors received by LT Goetz. Launched Clem II, 16:20 recovered Big Mother with two survivors, 16:23 launched SH-3 Big Mother, 16:25 recovered SH-3, 16:44 launched SH-3 for another downed aircraft 170° 53 miles, 17:50 recovered SH-3 (Big Mother) Commenced loading four survivors on SH-3 for transfer, 18:17 launched Big Mother 72 helo from main deck aft. 18:19 recovered CLEM II on main deck aft. Secured from SAR alert.

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

Notes:

- 1) Numbering as per HC-7 Rescue Log
- 2) HC-7 1968 Command Report
- 3) HC-7 Det 110 Rescue report
- 6) Map – Google Earth
- 7) Rescue 30-32 USS Halsey (DLG-23) - C.I.C. audio tape on file.
- 10) HC-7 History collection - Ron Milam – Historian