

HC-7 RESCUE 53 ⁽¹⁾ 30-Aug-1968 (Friday)

SH-3A Sikorsky Seaking helo Det 110 Big Mother 74
USS Sterett (DLG-31) USS Fechteler (DD-870) Combat Day ⁽²⁾
30 miles **INLAND** (straight) --- 120 mile round trip flight **INLAND**
Overland Wind: 10 knots

Pilot – LTJG Jeffrie E. Wiant
Co-pilot - LTJG Paskell D. January Jr.
1st crew – ADJ-2 George A. Smellie
2nd crew – AMH-3 Donald G. Burleson

(very difficult to read)
Alert received - 1730 : 1MC
Vehicle departed – 1733 : 26 miles
Arrived on scene – 1810: search required
Located survivor - 1815: Rescap/beeper/day smoke
Begin retrieval - 1825 : day smoke
Ended retrieval – 1855: “feet wet”
Survivor disembarked – 1913:

A-4F Skyhawk 154981 “Raven 316” “NF-316” VA-93, (Blue Blazer) USN
USS Bon Homme Richard (CVA-31)

Lcdr Harvey A. Eikel

Another aircraft was lost in the Vinh Son region when a section of Skyhawks was scouting over the area on an armed reconnaissance mission. The section found an anti-aircraft gun position and were jinking to avoid its deadly fire prior to commencing a bombing run. Lt Cdr Eikel’s aircraft was hit as it was in a turn at 5,000 feet causing a partial loss of control. All the aircraft’s systems failed in quick succession leading to a total loss of control forcing Lt Cdr Eikel to eject 25 miles northwest of Vinh. Despite being some 30 miles inland, the pilot was rescued from capture by a Navy SH-3 helicopter. Lt Cdr Eikel later converted to the A-7 and was shot down by a SAM while flying with VA-94 from the USS Coral Sea on 24 May 1972. ⁽⁵⁾ (HC-7 Rescue 100)



Lcdr Harvey Eikel

STATEMENT OF LTJG J.E. WIA NT, LTJG. USNR, PILOT OF BIG MOTHER 74. ⁽⁷⁾
(with inserts of statements by; January, Smellie and Burleson)

At 17:30 on 31 August 1968, I received "SAR ALERT" over the 1MC aboard the USS STERETT. The crewmen raced from below deck to the helo, arriving at the same time as the pilots. At 17:33, we were manned and I executed an ASE off take off without incident. ASE came on the line after about 1 1/2 minutes in the air. Burleson donned his swim gear, as they did not know the location of the SAR. I proceeded to my orbit point and awaited my rescap. We were given a position of the pilot in relation to the USS STERETT locating him about 220°/62 miles inland from our present position. A "straight line" route was impossible due to AAA sites and other fortifications. The crewman arranged their equipment, cleared the M-60s, as they learned the SAR was inland.

We examined the charts and decided on a route well to the south over the Vinh Hills and west to the mountains where we turned north along a ridgeline to the SAR location.

We sighted our A-4 escorts (3 miles off shore) and I started my penetration at 5,500' on a heading of 270°. Prior to crossing the beach, I called for IFF and lights off. The crewman handed us our armor and I authorized them to clear their weapons. As I crossed over the beach, I called "feet dry" and turned UHF communications over to my co-pilot.

Following the rescap vectors and interpreting our Flak charts, we proceeded to the ground without opposition or incident. The communications were very cluttered until we came under the direct control of the on-scene commander. He switched us to guard and everyone else to SAR primary. At this time, Big Mother 74, the on-scene commander, and the downed pilot were the only ones on guard and communications were excellent.

I turned east on my first approach and the on-scene commander (VA-94) flew by my starboard side in a dive and marked the spot by voice call and a steep pull-out. We marked it as 18° 45' and 105° 20'. I had the survivor localized now and called for a smoke marker as I began my decent through 3500' and approach. At this point, we received very heavy 37mm, 85mm and 100mm AAA fire and I worked to the north. Rescap suppressed the fire sufficiently enough for me to make a high speed 270° approach into what wind there was. He was about 2000' in a bamboo grove at the foot of a ridge. The survivor had a day smoke going which was immediately seen.

From 2 miles out, the survivor did an excellent job of calling us over him. We started receiving small arms fire at this time and I had to increase my hover altitude due to the dead leaves coming up. Co-pilot had a hard time holding number two engine on the line, the friction control was weak.

We used the forest penetrator and my crewman put it at about 10-15 feet from the survivor. Crewman SMELLIE directed the pilot over the survivor. He made his way to the penetrator and attempted to deploy the seats and experienced problems so he detached it and hooked himself on by his D-ring. The high speed hoist performed as advertised and when SMELLIE called "survivor clear – break hover" at 18:25, I exited the area. The survivor trailed behind the helo for 15-20 seconds, while the crewmen winched him inside. The survivor stated that he was too tired to work the zippers on the forest penetrator so he took it off and attached the hook to his torso harness "D" ring. Crewmen placed a flak jacket on the survivor and seated him. WIANT, asked the crewmen to provide the survivor a bottle of brandy, from the first aid box. Survivor drank one and later a second, with 3 cups of water. He was in shock and extremely exhausted. His knee was injured, no noticeable bleeding.

We were in the hover about three minutes and received small arms rounds through the after fuel cell, cabin deck, part of fuselage skin, and number two main rotor blades. The self-sealing cell worked satisfactorily and we headed south along the route we came in on. The crewmen stuffed a rag in the hole, watching the gages, with no noticeable unbalance between the tanks. At this point, it was suggested I use a route into Thailand, and declined because I was not informed of the Air Force SAR elements airborne ready to escort us to NAKHON PHANOM. I also considered our available SAR A/C and decided that if I went to Thailand our SAR assets would be greatly impaired.

My crewman expended M-60 ammunition throughout. They each had their weapons jam at least once.

We started out at 6300' and received 37mm, 55mm, 85mm, and 100mm fire throughout the entire route. A-4 rescap did an outstanding suppression job and got several secondaries. My co-pilot fired two clips from his M-16 at several people on the deck as I broke hover but I had to make him stop because the empty cases were bouncing off the windscreen into my face.

SMELLIE - On the way out, we drew more flak. I think it was 57mm as we were about 5,500 feet and it was bursting between 7 and 8,000 feet. Three salvos of at least eight rounds each were fired at us. The first salvo went aft and up at almost 6 o'clock. They walked it up and the third salvo was closer to us and going up at almost 3 o'clock. At this time, I saw two A-4's start in on a run and the flak was suppressed. About 5 minutes, we drew some more flak but it was bursting at least 1,000 feet below us. An A-4 made a run on the site, dropped one bomb and suppressed the site. BURLESON – I knew for sure they saved our skins. We did not draw any more fire on the way out.

Through evasive maneuvers, excellent rescap and on-scene commanders from VA-94, we made it "feet wet" with only a few more scratches and dents from flak bursts. During the entire exit, we received ground fire.

USS Sterett, deck log entry: 19:11 observed sunset. ⁽¹²⁾

We landed back aboard the USS STERETT at 19:13⁽¹²⁾ without incident and the survivor, LCDR Harvey EIKEL, USN, from VA-93 received medical attention. Eikel suffered multiple abrasions, superficial powder burns on left hand, 1 ½ inch laceration on scalp, and contusion of right knee. ⁽¹²⁾

SMELLIE- The support and cooperation received from the DLG's is outstanding.

On post flight we found that we took 3 hits. One in the aft fuel cell just forward of the aft station. It went through the cell and out the cabin over head. We took one round through one rotor blade. That was the extent of the damage.

The success of this mission can be best attributed to the state of readiness the SAR posture is continually in. The fast reactions of the on scene commander, the rescap, and the coordination by the USS STERETT. The high degree of coverage and professionalism exhibited by my crewman and co-pilot were without exception.

BURLESON - The reason the front M-60 jammed (it jammed four or five times through the flight) was because of a poorly designed mount. The ammo belt had to make several tight bends and this would lock up the gun. In my opinion, this mount should be redesigned.

Remarks: RESCAP had problems finding us. Clustered communications until on-scene-commander put us on guard with him and survivor. Received heavy AAA, small arms, and automatic fire from first approach until feet wet, approximately 59 minutes. Survivor had trouble with forced penetrator. M-60 jammed. M-16 expended shells from copilot hit pilot in face. The state of readiness and training of rescue crew was excellent and was the primary reason that the mission was successful. Communications were overcrowded until the on-scene-commander segregated channels approximately halfway through the mission. Non-understanding of forest penetrator cause delay – survivor discarded same and utilize “D” ring. High speed hoist a lifesaver. HH-3A preformed well and had the range and power required. Limited airspeed was only problem.

Wiant received the NAVY CROSS, January and Smellie received the DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS and Burleson received the AIR MEDAL. ⁽¹³⁾

The longest successful rescue penetration of a Navy helo over North Vietnam.

“One of the most professional SAR pick-ups I have ever seen” CDR A. Lou Alexandria. XO, VF-51 ⁽⁹⁾



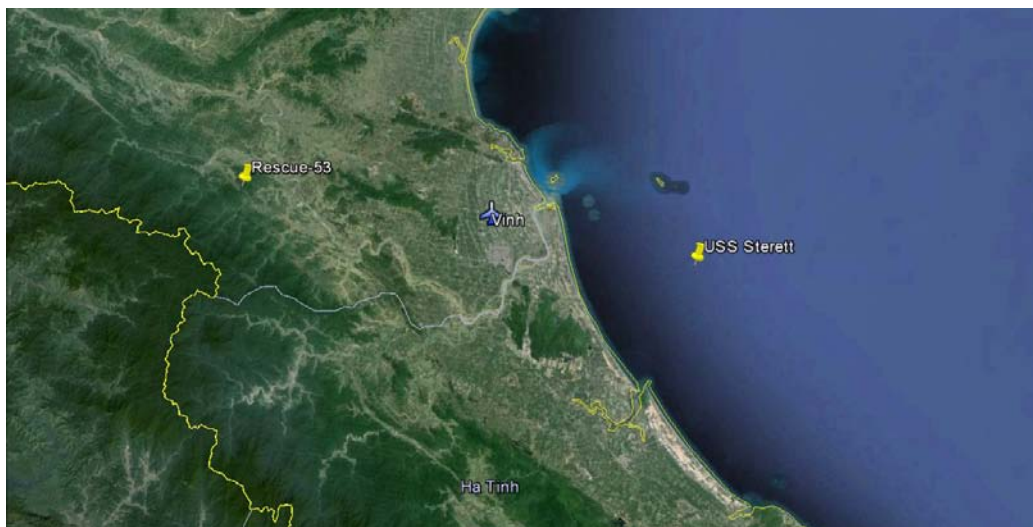
Don Garrett welcomes Jeff Wiant



George Smellie



Don Burleson



NARRATIVE Story by: Don Burleson: 2nd Crewman ⁽⁶⁾

The Big Mother H-3 crew, Pilot, LTJG Wiant, Co-pilot, LTJG P.D. January, First Crewman ADJ-2 George Smellie, Second Crewman AMH-3 Don Burleson were completing a rotation tour aboard the USS Sterett, DLG-31, North SAR, Tonkin Gulf. During chow call, 17:30 over the MC1 speaker sounded the SAR alarm. The helo crew scrambles to the flight deck, yelling; “Clear a Hole”, though the passageways arriving at the flight deck, located on the O-1 level.

As the SAR crew arrives at the helo, chained down to the deck, the H-2, Clementine crew members prepare to launch Big Mother. The pilot and co-pilot had pre-set all switches in the ready position to lessen the time for launch. The pilots started number one engine as they reached their seats and the deck crew removed the tie down chains. As the SAR alarm sounded, the USS Sterett turned into the wind, increasing forward speed to give a positive lift to assist the helo.

Within two minutes, the deck crew removed the chocks and the flight deck director waved the pilot off deck, with a sharp salute. With the collective in his armpit, the pilot and the cycle pushed forward, the helo is airborne

Pushing the helo to maximum speed, the helo was 2 miles from the ship when the ASE (Automatic Stabilization Equipment) came on line; the helo jumped 10 feet and then settled down. Rescap informed the pilot that the area around Vinh, North Vietnam was well protected with 85 mm AAA gun sites. Their approach to the downed pilot would be in a circular route to the south of Vinh, then turning northerly to avoid direct contact with the AAA gun sites. RESCAP gave the word to go “FEET DRY”. Back up helos, Clementine and another Big Mother from the carrier would stay “FEET WET”, until requested.

Things seemed to be going fine, until the helo over flew the site of the downed pilot, LCDR Eikel. This bought the crew into contact and view of the ground forces that were searching for the downed pilot. RESCAP informed the helo crew that they were being tracked by radar controlled AAA site and needed to do a 180° turn immediately.

The downed pilot, had only made 100 yards from his aircraft, he was within minutes of being captured. The Viet-Cong and dogs were on his trail. The RESCAP leader (A-4) came down and made a very low pass directly over the downed pilot to indicate his position. The dense jungle made a visual location impossible. As the helo came into a hover over the day smoke, small ground fire erupted from below.

From the port side door, Don returned fire with the mounted M-60, and the co-pilot, P.D. January, shot from his window with an M-16. The hot expended casings from January's M16 were hitting Pilot Wiant in the face, causing burns. Several times, they had to hold their fire so they could hear the communications with the pilot on the ground.

Things were becoming very intense, Don continued to return fire, almost striking the A-4 as it came screaming through his line of fire, to launch missiles at the gun site. Several secondary explosions occurred and the site became less of a problem. That was a welcome site and the A-4 guys could lay down the ordinance. Don knew they were in deep shit when a couple of bullets came straight up through the fuel cells (self-sealing), as he smelled the distinct odor of JP-5 jet fuel. A vision of going down in a ball of fire passed through his mind. Fortunately JP-5 is less volatile than other aviation fuels.

1st Crewman George Smellie, operating the rescue hoist from the starboard cargo door, had the rescue cable prepared for deployment, placing several feet of cable on the deck. The rescue hoist would operate slowly for several feet and then speed up, this procedure would allow for a faster mode immediately. Crewman Smellie sent the "Forest Penetrator" through the canopy of the jungle. Unknown to who was to coming up on the hoist, George aimed his M-16 down the cable. It looked as if they had the right person. George informed pilot Wiant, as soon as the pilot had cleared jungle canopy, the helo turned to the east and headed home. Don left his position at the M60, to assist George trying to get the pilot into the helo. The helo was in fast forward flight and the pilot was streaming behind. The crew pulled the pilot into the helo, where he piled up on the deck. Quickly jumping up, LCDR Eikel, eased over to the cargo door and gave the people on the ground a three finger salute and Yelled above the sound of the helo; "F....Y...., you didn't get me!!"

George and Don, checked LCDR Eikel over for injuries, strapped him into the forward crew seat, wrapped him in a flak jacket, and verified his name. Reaching into the First Aid Kit, Smellie pulled out two small airline bottles of whisky and handed them to Eikel. Medicinal purposes only.

En route East, twice the AAA fire became very intense. As they approached the coast Don believes that the Tin Can was firing at the AAA sites. The sun was setting behind the Vinh Hill, Don was very excited to see that the North SAR ships had cruised west, and were very close to the coastline. As the DLG came into site Don's viewed "OLD GLORY" waving from the mast. **A great site!**

After landing on the ship, (19:30), LCDR Eikel jumped out of the helo onto the deck and fell to his knees. The medical corpsman took him to sickbay for an examination, later to learn he had injured his knee. The Admiral debriefed the helo crew of this 130-mile round trip through enemy territory. Don went to the chow hall for some food and drink. The plane captain looked over the helo, found holes in the fuel cells, rotor blades and tail rotor blades. And one hole was through the support flange of the intermediate tail rotor gearbox. Big Mother spent the night on the DLG, Don didn't sleep this night.

The next day, BIG MOTHER crew flew back to the carrier. The carrier was on a turnaround schedule headed to Japan. Don and George would cross-deck with the HC-7 crew to continue their tour on line. Pilot Wiant and co-pilot January, rode the carrier back to Yokuska, Japan, where a big party was held at Atsugi, Japan, to celebrate the rescue. Pilot Wiant wrote a letter to Don and George to tell them about the party as they continued on detachment with BIG MOTHER Det 110. ⁽⁶⁾

NOTE: LCDR HARVEY. A. EIKEL was later to be rescued a second time by BIG MOTHER – HC-7 crews. Rescue Number 100 Combat Day, May 24, 1972 – (A-7 from Coral Sea-VA-94) HC-7 Pilot – CDR Woolman, Co-Pilot – LCDR Jones, 1st crewman, ADJ2 Dickerson, 2nd crewman Canzler

- 1) Numbering as per HC-7 Rescue Log (accumulative rescue number)
- 2) HC-7 1968 Command Report
- 3) HC-7 Det 110 Rescue report
- 4) Map – Google Earth
- 5) "Vietnam - Air Losses" By: Chris Hobson (with permission)
- 6) NARRATIVE, Story by: Don Burleson: 2nd Crewman (Phone conversation with and written by: Ron Milam, 6-4-2005)
- 7) Det 110 helo crew statements – re-typed from rescue report documents
- 8) USS Sterett CIC Audio Tape on file – contributed by: Donald Burleson
- 9) Atsugi “Skywriter” April 18, 1969
- 10) HC-7 History collection; Ron Milam - Historian
- 12) USS Sterett – Deck Logs
- 13) “Orphans of the Seventh Fleet – the story of HC-7”, DRAFT - by: Mark L. Morgan
- 14) Loss aircraft location data provided by: W. Howard Plunkett (LtCol USAF, retired)

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