

HC-7 Attempt RESCUE 02-Oct-1968

(Wednesday)

SH-3A Sikorsky Seaking helo Det 110 Big Mother 149735
USS Turner (DLG-20) South SAR Station Combat Day ⁽²⁾
Water 80° - Air Temp 92° 2.6 hours

Pilot – LT	Michael J. Trinnich
Co-pilot - LTJG	Richard Carver
1st crew – AE-2	Robert Childress
2nd crew – ADJAN	Robert Stover

14:42 UHF Guard
14:45 46 Miles
15:10 Search required - Yes

Back up helo – UH-2B (SAR)

Location was 19°00' N, 105°47' E, approximately 200 yards off shore of level beach with heavy tree line 100 feet from water. Many small boats in area. Both helos came under small arms fire from tree line upon entering area. Later, started drawing heavy automatic weapons fire. RESCAP came under 37mm fire when they tried to suppress fire on helo from tree line. Nothing but pilot's helmet and A/C wreckage could be found. Ended visual search at 16:00, negative results. Pilot not sighted after water entry and heavy enemy fire.

A-4E 151126 (NP-411) (Magic Stone 411) VA-164, (Ghost Riders) USN,
USS Hancock (CVA-19)

Cdr Donald Edward Erwin (KIA)
Born; 01-01-1929 - Hobart, Indiana – Married
Body recovered – 7-31-1989
Wall Panel 42W, Row 061

A section of A-4s on a road reconnaissance mission ran into 85mm AAA near the village of Ngoc Long Ha, 20 miles northwest of Vinh. Cdr Erwin was jinking his aircraft in an attempt to

avoid being tracked by the gunners but to no avail as his aircraft was hit in the wing. He turned his burning aircraft towards the sea, streaming a trail of leaking fuel. Cdr Erwin was unable to jettison his bombs and the fire was growing in intensity, so as soon as he crossed the coast he ejected. However, a split second after his seat fired, the aircraft exploded. The explosion probably stunned or killed Erwin as he did not surface after parachuting into the sea. One of the many fishing boats seen in the area at the time probably retrieved the Commander's body as his remains were handed over to the US and identified in March 1990. ⁽⁵⁾

**Rescue Attempt for Cdr Donald Edward Erwin
October 2, 1968
SH-3A and UH-2B
USS Raymond K. Turner (DLG-20)**

Written by: Dick Carver May 23, 2006

We were positioned aboard the Turner at North SAR station during the daytime when the call came and Lt Trinnich, Ltjg Carver, AE2 Childress and ADJAN Stover manned the SH3A "Big Mother" aircraft and launched for the Vinh River delta at about the 19th Latitude on the coast of North Vietnam. The day was pretty calm and we were flying as fast as we could low level with the Clementine which was launched from (I think the Turner but not sure). Also think the Clem was Berry and Brennan because your records have them on North SAR at this time. We were operating from North SAR.

We arrived on scene about a quarter after three and what we saw was a whole "fleet" of small North Vietnamese fishing boats in a circle around what turned out to be a Navy pilot's helmet floating only about 200 yards offshore. We could also see the tail of an A-4 sticking out of the water a bit to the south of this position. No pilot was visible so the Clementine was going from boat to boat looking down inside to see if they could see any signs of the pilot of the A4. One of the fishing boats had made the mistake of firing on the Clementine and the crew was returning fire to suppress that aggression. The rest of the fishing boats had either learned from that experience or were unarmed as nobody else fired at us from the boats.

About the same time some interesting things were happening over on the beach. It was kind of a spit of land between where the Vinh River swept a bit to the North and emptied into the Tonkin Gulf. On the spit of land, which was fairly heavily tree covered, some locals were firing small weapons at us as we could see flashes but we were either out of range or they were just poor shots and we were mostly ignoring them. The other thing happening on the beach was that a small vehicle was pulling out onto the sand and it had at least one radar dish mounted on it. It started to "scan" and shortly afterward we noticed another threatening event.

Up to the North of the site we were working, a small rectangular "hill" actually had what appeared to be three large doors in it's side. The entire face of the hill may have been artificial because it "stuck out" from the surrounding area and didn't look like the rest of the beach area surrounding it. One of those doors opened up and the barrel of a fairly large gun became visible.

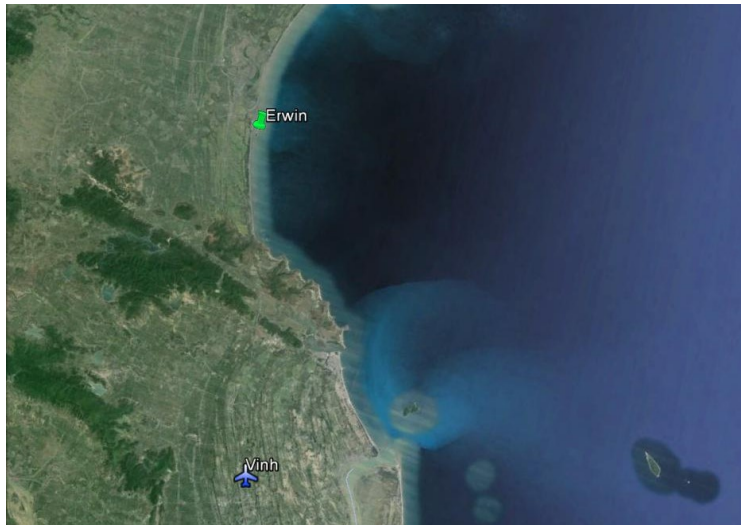
Shortly after, all hell broke loose at the site where we were hovering. As the first explosion occurred it was obviously much larger than small arms. It sent a pretty big geyser of water up into the air. Lt Trinnich immediately departed the hover and, as we were faced Northwest, he made a tight turn to the left, flying approximately over the tail of the A4 sticking out of the water. The gun followed us and Lt Trinnich zigged and zagged at some petty high torques as we raced to the Southeast away from the site. The gun followed us left to right as we ran away from the location but it never was able to predict Mike's actions and we were able to fly out of range. Finally, the explosions kind of "fell behind us" and we knew we were in the clear. Clementine scattered in a similar manner but I didn't pay much attention as we were "fully occupied" with getting out of there. As we flew back to the Turner we began to see things deteriorating with the main transmission and a couple of minutes prior to landing, the chip light illuminated and we made an emergency (hastened) landing on the Turner and shut the bird down.

Turns out that being expeditious about the landing was necessary because the crew pulled the strainer and a good part of the transmission came out in their hands.

The result was a trip down to Danang on the Turner's flight deck, where an Army Skycrane was utilized to offload our bird to Danang AFB. We spent a couple of days in Danang and it was a real learning experience as Mike and I both reversed roles with Childress and Stover and assisted them in the transmission change. Mostly we assisted them by staying out of the way. When repaired, it was test flown enroute to Yankee Station and returned to duty.

About the only other exciting event in Danang was that the Viet Cong chose to lob a couple of rockets into the bunker next door to where we slept those nights. We (and our neighbors) were fortunate not to be injured by those events but I still remember the sound of a rocket attack and the explosions in the middle of the night.

It was a big disappointment that we were unable to rescue Cdr. Erwin and I always wondered who he was and what actually happened to him. In a sense, seeing your records of the event, finding out that one of those fishing boats had picked up his body and knowing that his remains were eventually returned to his loved ones has been a bit of closure for me.



- 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)
- 10) HC-7 History collection; Ron Milam - Historian
- 12) USS Hancock – NO data within deck logs

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