

First Rescue Up North

This is a good read about a Thud Pilot who was shot down near Hanoi and was "The first pilot rescued up North!"

Enclosed is a report on the first Jolly Green helicopter rescue mission in Vietnam. A good read. For pilots shot down over North Vietnam, then rescued their return home was 'jolly and green'.

Frank Tullo has never forgotten his first day as a newly promoted USAF captain. He was 25 years old and he was flying fighter bomber missions into Viet Nam from Korat, one of two F-105 bases in Thailand.

Most fighter crews were not optimistic about their chances for rescue. There was a standing joke among the often chain-smoking Thud crews that an optimistic Thud driver was one who thought he'd die of lung cancer. The fact of the matter, a study showed, was that during a typical 100-mission tour, a F-105 pilot could easily get shot down twice and picked up once.

At about the time Tullo received his captain's bars, air rescue planners had decided to make an effort to improve downed pilots' chances.

In the middle of 1965, Tullo was flying as Dogwood Two in a flight led by Major Bill Hosmer, a former Thunderbird and the best pilot Tullo had ever flown with.

Dogwood was to be the cleanup flight: the last of several flights to strike surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites in North Vietnam. Their job was to take out any SAM sites not already destroyed.

To destroy the missile sites and take out their control centers, each Thud was loaded with two pods of rockets and an internal 20-millimeter Gatling cannon. Along with the rockets.

Tullo was part of a maximum effort involving at least 48 F-105s, and another 50 or so supporting aircraft.

At this early stage of the war dealing with SAMs had not been developed. The projected learning curve for the months ahead was nearly vertical.

It was mid-afternoon when Tullo's flight came over the hills from the south of Hanoi to clean up leftover targets. He had been listening to the action on the attack frequency. From the sound of things, some friendly aircraft were down.

Tullo's flight cleared the last ridge at treetop level before arriving at the target area. Working to hold his position on Lead's wing, Tullo managed to steal a look ahead. "I damn near fainted," he told me years later. "To a good Catholic boy, this was the description of hell." The whole valley was a cauldron of flame and smoke .. and AAA flak .. filled the sky.

Hosmer had the flight on course for the first SAM site they were to check out. Tracers were flying past the canopies and the smell of cordite was strong [most pilots depressurized their cockpits when nearing the target area so that, if hit, smoke from an onboard engine fire would not be sucked inside the cockpit. Just days before, Tullo had seen a column of smoke stream pour from inside another Thud's still-pressurized cockpit after the pilot's canopy was jettisoned.]

The flight pressed lower. The Thud would do nearly 700 mph on the deck.

Tullo was sure they were under 200 feet and was working hard to stay in position on Lead. Without warning, his lead broke hard left, exclaiming "Damn, they just salvoed!" [Sometimes SAM batteries would fire all their missiles at once in an effort to protect their valuable control vans]. Tullo could see only the huge wall of smoke and flame coming at the flight from the AAA guns protecting the SAM sites.

Their tremendous speed caused the flight to turn wide enough to be carried directly over the site of the guns. As they passed over, Tullo looked right into the flaming muzzles of a battery of quad guns.

They were at 100 feet or lower .. still near 700 mph. Tullo glanced over at Lead to check his position, then glanced back and noticed a fire warning light. "Lead, I have a fire light," he radioed. Then element lead called: " Two, you're on fire. Get out!"

Hosmer kept the flight in the turn, saying, "Two, loosen it up. I'm going to look you over."

The flight leader said, "Better clean off your wing, Frank." Tullo jettisoned the external fuel tanks and rocket pods on his wings; his Thud lightened up.

Three was calling again, his voice tight with urgency. "Two, the flames are trailing a good 150 feet behind you. You better get out!"

In spite of the fire and the calls from Three, Tullo felt a sense of well-being. He was still flying, he had control, and he was with Hosmer. Nothing bad would ever happen with old Hoz leading. It would work out. The fire would go out, the aircraft would keep flying, he would make it back.

They were still over Hanoi. Houses were below them. Mountains to the west [which would come to be known as Thud Ridge, offered refuge]. A good bailout area, just in case.

"You better get out, Frank, it's really burning," Hosmer said in a calm voice. "Negative," Tullo replied. "It's still flying. I've lost the auxiliary electrical power, but I've got the standby instruments. I'm heading straight ahead for that ridge." [Earlier in the war, several pilots whose air-craft were on fire, ejected over the target, and they were either killed or taken prisoner.]

There had been incidents in the Thud's checkered past when a burning aircraft had exploded before the pilot could eject, but many others had flown for a considerable time without blowing up. Many pilots, like Tullo, had decided to take their chances staying with their aircraft as long as they could, rather than eject in the target area.

The ridge was still well ahead of the aircraft. The flight had climbed some but was still very low and being shot at from all quarters.

Tullo's aircraft dropped its nose slightly. He pulled back on the stick. No response. He pulled harder. Still nothing. When he heard muffled explosions in the rear of his aircraft, Tullo hit the mike button: "I've gotta go, Lead. I'm losing controls. They're not responding."

At 200 feet, there was no time to wait. If the aircraft nosed down, physics would be against him. Even if he managed to eject, he would likely bounce just behind the aircraft, still in the seat. He pulled up the arm rests, which jettisoned the canopy, locked his elbows in the proper position, and revealed the trigger that fired the seat.

The results were the most horrific Tullo had ever experienced. At the speed he was moving, the noise, the roar, the buffet-ing -- it was unbelievable. Everything not bolted down in the cockpit went flying past his face.

He froze for a matter of seconds before he squeezed the trigger to fire the seat. The ejection process that followed was so violent that today Tullo's memory is blank of every-thing that happened immediately after he squeezed the trigger. He doesn't remember leaving the cockpit, the seat separating, or the chute opening. He had the low-level lanyard hooked, which attached the parachute directly to the seat and caused it to deploy almost immediately.

After tumbling violently, whomp! he was swinging in the chute. A little battered by the violent ejection, Tullo prepared for the landing. Floating down in the chute was serene and the soft rush of air soothed him. He did not see his aircraft crash.

During his descent, he eyed the city of Hanoi about 25 miles away. A small U-shaped farmhouse sat near a clearing, just to the west. He passed below the 100-foot treetops and landed in an area of 10-foot elephant grass.

At that moment, listening to the sound of his flight disappearing to the southwest, the only thing in his mind was that he was on the ground in North Vietnam, armed only with a .38 Special.

His first concern was to hide the billowing white parachute. Working hard to control his breathing, he stuffed the parachute under the matted grass and covered it up with dirt. After shedding his harness and survival kit, he removed the emergency radio from his vest, extended the antenna, and prepared to contact Dogwood flight.

He could hear them returning, and he had to let them know he was all right. As the flight drew closer, Tullo turned on the survival radio. Cupping his hand around the mouthpiece, he whispered: "Dogwood Lead, this is Dogwood Two." Hoz responded immediately: "Roger Two, Lead is reading you. We're going to get a fix on your position." The flight turned toward Tullo, who had landed on a hillside west of Hanoi.

He could hear heavy anti-aircraft fire to the east and see puffs of flak dancing around the flight. Within seconds, hot shrapnel began to fall around him. "Frank, we gotta go. Fuel is getting low, and we've been ordered out of the area. We're gonna get you a chopper." Hosmer's voice dropped: "And, Frank," he said, "this may be an all-nighter."

Tullo rogered Hosmer's message and told him he was going to try to work his way higher up the slope to make the pickup easier. He had no doubt that he would be rescued. As the sound of Dogwood flight faded to the southwest, Tullo prepared to move up the hill to a better vantage point. He decided to open the survival kit and remove useful equipment.

In a normal ejection, once stabilized in the chute and prior to landing, a pilot would reach down and pull a handle on the kit's box to deploy it. It was advisable to deploy the kit prior to landing to avoid possible leg injuries, since the case was hard and fairly heavy. Tullo hadn't had this option because he had ejected at such a low level. He rotated the kit's red handle, and with a great whooshing roar, a dinghy began to inflate.

he dinghy! He had forgotten all about that! And it was bright yellow! He had to stop the noise. Tullo drew a large survival knife he wore strapped to the leg of his G-suit, threw himself on the dinghy, and began stabbing it. The first two blows merely rebounded. With a final mighty effort, he plunged the knife into the rubber and cut a large hole so the air could escape.

With that emergency solved, Tullo lay back to catch his breath and get a drink of water. Then he started up the hill. The elephant grass was so dense that at times he couldn't separate it with his hands and had to climb over the tough, wide blades. After climbing about 50 to 75 feet, he realized he wasn't going to make it to the top.

His flightsuit was soaked, and his hands were cut by the sharp edges of the grass. Rather than waste more energy, he flattened out a small space in the grass and faced southeast to have a good view of any threat coming up the slope. Time to set up housekeeping. Tullo's survival vest and kit included a spare battery for the radio, emergency beeper, day and night flares, pen flares, six rounds of tracer ammo, a "blood chit" printed in several languages that promised rewards for assisting downed American airmen, gold bars for buying freedom, maps, a first aid kit, water purification tablets, two tins of water, two packets of high-energy food, tape, string, 250 feet of rappelling line, a saw, knife, compass, shark repellent, fishing kit, whistle, signaling mirror, sewing kit, and two prophylactics for keeping ammunition or other equipment clean and dry.

He extracted the ball ammo from his 38, loaded the tracers, and stuffed everything not immediately useful into the knapsack-type pouch. Then he sat back, tried to relax, and waited for the rescuers he knew would come.

Tullo heard the sound of prop-driven aircraft approaching from the north. He correctly assumed they were Douglas A-1s, or "Spads," as they were called. He stood up and keyed his radio. "This is Dogwood Two, do you read me?" "Dogwood Two, this is Canasta, and we read you. Transmit for bearing." Tullo warned Canasta of the flak to the east, and as advertised, the guns opened up on the Spads as they approached Tullo's position.

As soon as Tullo could see the aircraft, he began giving vectors. On the second circle, Tullo was looking right up the wing of a Spad. He called, "Canasta, I'm off your right wingtip now." Canasta Lead said, "Gotcha! Don't worry, we're going for a chopper."

As the Spads droned out of the area, Tullo felt sure he would be picked up. Within a few minutes, he heard the unmistakable sound of Thuds. He spoke on the survival radio calling: "Any F-105 over Vietnam .. this is Dogwood Two."

An answer came from a flight of Thuds approaching in a wide sweeping turn from the north. A voice that Tullo recognized, asked him to 'pop' a smoke flare for location. "Smoke?" Tullo replied. "Are you out of your mind? There's no way I'm going to pop smoke here!"

The pilot told Tullo to calm down. On the other hand, he'd just spotted trucks unloading troops to the south of Tullo's position. But he reassured Tullo that they were working on getting a rescue helicopter over to him.

Tullo heard shots. The shots built to a crescendo, then stopped. The shooting had started at some distance, but now it grew closer.

Soon he was able to hear voices as the troops worked their way up the hillside. He burrowed into the dense grass and waited, his heart pounding. He raised his head and saw an older man about 150 to 175 feet away wearing a cone-shaped straw hat. It was all Tullo could do not to make a run for it, but that was exactly what the searchers wanted him to do. He forced himself to sit quietly.

The troops made a lot of noise but they kept moving, down the hill to the East. Silence returned and Tullo continued to wait.

George Martin was flying his CH-3 Sikorsky helicopter to a remote staging area in Laos about 120 miles from Hanoi. Only a few weeks before he had been flying cargo support at Eglin in Florida. Today, he was boss of a small detachment of men and helicopters on a 120-day assignment in Vietnam.

He and his crew had been tasked to learn a new mission for which they had little preparation. In 1965, as the number of U.S. air strikes and reconnaissance missions in Vietnam multiplied, pilots faced the increasing possibility of being downed deep inside Laos or North Vietnam. Crews were flying the small and slow HH-43 Huskie, originally designed as an air-base firefighting and rescue helicopter, and were already pushing the helicopter to its limits. There was clearly a need for a faster rescue helicopter with longer legs.

The cargo-carrying CH-3C helicopter fit the bill, and the Air Force began training crews to match. The training was projected to last several months, but the escalating conflict wouldn't wait.

Martin, who was too close to retirement to be selected for the additional training, was ordered to fill in the gap with 21 men and two CH-3s until the fully trained crews arrived.

"I found out Friday afternoon and was gone Sunday," Martin says. "It was just like in the movies. I: 'When do I leave?' They: 'How fast can you pack?'"

Martin was about to land when he was asked to divert and try to rescue a downed F-105 pilot. But he still needed to drop off cargo and extra crew, lighten up, take on as much fuel as possible and still be able to pick up the pilot. "The big consideration in helicopter pickup is gross weight," Martin said. "If you're too heavy to hover, all you can do is fly around and wave at him."

Upon landing, Martin's number two engine overtemp warning light went on .. possibly foreign object damage or a compressor stall from air starvation. Under normal circumstances the light would have grounded the helicopter. The crew became pretty apprehensive about continuing to fly the helicopter. I told them, "We're this pilot's only hope. If the engine will start again .. we will go."

His crew reluctantly agreed. The engine restarted without incident and Martin's "Jolly Green One," took off for Hanoi. Martin had no idea where to locate the downed pilot. And he was unescorted until he was about 50 miles away from Hanoi, where he was joined by Canasta flight [from the carrier USS Midway].

The oppressive afternoon heat wore on. Finally, Tullo heard the sound of prop-driven aircraft again. Darkness was about 40 minutes away as he turned on his radio. The aircraft responded immediately. "Dogwood Two, this is Canasta. I have a chopper for you." Seconds later, Canasta flight flew directly over Tullo's position, and there, not far behind, came a rescue helicopter.

Tullo was expecting a small chopper. But this one was a big green monster, Martin's Jolly Green .. headed for its first combat recovery. "Dogwood Two, this is Jolly Green. How'm I doing?" Tullo said, "You're doing great!" and popped his smoke flares. The chopper's blades made the smoke swirl as Tullo then pointed his .38 straight up and fired all six tracers.

Martin's crew chief pinpointed the downed pilot in the thick elephant grass as soon as his smoke made its way above the trees. Then, as Martin hovered, the crew chief lowered a "horse collar" sling from their jury-rigged cargo winch .

On the ground, the downblast was tremendous. Debris flew everywhere, and the trees and grass were whipping and bending wildly. Tullo holstered his pistol, slung the survival kit over his shoulder, and slipped the horse collar over his head. He gave the crew chief in the door a thumbs-up. The cable became taut and Tullo began to rise off the ground. After being lifted about 10 feet, the hoist jammed and the cable stopped.

The crew chief was giving hand signals Tullo did not understand. Tullo looked up. Two crewmen were in the helicopter door lowering a rope to him. The horse collar was cutting off the circulation in Tullo's arms and he was tiring, but he grabbed the rope and tied it around the top of the horse collar.

Finally the chopper began to move and dragged Tullo through some bushes, brambles and trees. Everybody's trying to kill me, he thought.

The Jolly climbed and circled as the crew chief struggled with the hoist. The helicopter's overworked number two engine had begun to overheat. A fire light

came on in the Jolly's cockpit. As they circled, Martin hoped that the air flowing through the engine would cool it down and the light might go off. The two crew members were joined by the copilot, and the three men strained to pull the dangling man aboard.

The pain was becoming so great that Tullo was thinking about dropping from the sling. Just then, Martin spotted a rice paddy next to a hooch and lowered Tullo to the ground.

The exhausted pilot rolled out of the sling as the chopper swung away and landed 50 or 60 feet away. The crew frantically shouted to Tullo, who sprinted and dove through the door. He could hear an automatic weapon firing and saw both helicopter pilots ducking their heads.

The Jolly had problems: low fuel, a sick engine, darkness, and clouds at altitude.

Martin and his crew had been in the war zone slightly more than two weeks and did not even have maps of the area. He crew relied on flares lit inside 55-gallon drums at his remote base and his landing lights to find a place to land.

"Our troops only held about a quarter of the area around our site," Martin said. "That was the only corridor you could fly through without getting shot at".

Martin finally landed with a shaken pilot and just 750 pounds of fuel aboard.

Tullo learned his aircraft was one of six Thuds and one EB-66 electronic counter-measures aircraft shot down that day.

Of three surviving pilots, Tullo was the only one rescued--the others were to spend more than seven years as POWs.

Tullo returned to a Thunderchief cockpit and completed his combat tour.

Tullo's rescue was the farthest north that a successful pickup had been made, thanks to the determination of Martin and his crew and the long range of their helicopter. It was the first of 1,490 recoveries that Jolly Green Giants would make in Southeast Asia.

Soon a dedicated air rescue version would be built, with in-flight refueling capability, armor plating, a powerful hoist, and shatterproof canopies. But, the Jolly Green Giant would find its ultimate form in the HH-53 Super Jolly, an even larger and more powerful helicopter still flown today.

Technology improved, but future helicopter rescue crews still had to meet the same basic requirements .. willingness to fly and hover inside a big target over

hostile territory .. and find a pilot .. whose only hope would appear above him
carrying a cable and a sling.