

Air America Rescue - McGrath
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By Chuck McGrath

An Air America H-34 crew rescued me on 21 July 1971. Location: Some distance north of the PDJ. We were tasked as a single Jolly Green (HH-53) crew to recover a drone, and ended up going down during the effort just as we were picking the #1 PJ by hoist. We rolled over a couple times and ended up against some trees. The loss was later determined to be from ground fire in the area. The crews involved in the rescue saw the Jolly upside down up against some trees on the down slope side of a small clearing. The drone was in middle of the clearing. The tip tanks were jettisoned in the area of the drone. The drone parachute was in the in trees at the upper end of clearing. Three crewmembers (pilot, copilot, and FE) were at the lower end of the slope. Two others (PJs) were located about the middle of the clearing. A Huey came in first. Picked up the FE, suffering from severe back pains, (later learned he had ruptured disc in spine), by having him grab the skids so they could hover taxi with him further up the slope to where I was with the other PJ, who had extensive facial injuries. A rotor blade hit my partner as the helicopter went down. We got the FE in the Huey, I passed Jon's IV bottle up to someone in the Huey, and then we got Jon in. I got in to help treat them. I guess there wasn't enough lift to get us out of there, because one of the Air America crew tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to get out. Just what I needed! Out I go. Huey spins around, comes close to giving me a crewcut with the tail rotor, and exits successfully. About 10 minutes later an H-34 comes in and picks up the pilot and copilot with hoist and horse collar. The hoist breaks with me about 10 feet up and I'm back on the ground again with the hoist operator reeling in the cable by hand as they exit the area. I heard some periodic ground fire while taking stock of the situation. I guess it was about 10 or 15 minutes later - who kept track? Another H-34 came in and picked me up by horse collar. We were all taken to Lima 54 where the pilot, copilot, and I got a hop on an Air America C-130 to Udorn. The three of us were bruised up, nothing serious, but they stuck us in the hospital there for the night. I still don't know how the injured FE and my partner got back to Udorn, but they were there in the hospital when we woke up the next morning. The flight the next day to determine whether helicopter was recoverable was greeted by so much ground fire that the Sandies were directed to destroy the Jolly. Please pass this through your association. I want to give a more meaningful thanks to those men and welcome any e-mail. A handshake was all we had time for that day.