

The Easter Egg Hunt - Cates  
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From the Air America Perspective  
By Allen Cates

By the spring of 1972, the war in Vietnam had changed its complexion since 1965. America's role of providing fighting men had all but ended and the lead belonged to the Army of South Vietnam. The war in Laos had escalated. American ground troops were forbidden in country but the air war had increased significantly. The road network along the Vietnam and Laotian border was commonly called Ho Chi Minh's Trail. It had previously been occupied with North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies streaming southward into the Vietnam Delta. Now, it was used to supply enemy troops in southern Laos. Air America used a simple term and called it the road. Only a few people have seen it. Those who worked the area long enough to know about its hazards really did not want to see it.

The description, Ho Chi Minh's Trail, did not accurately describe the road. The trail was a network of large roadways that could carry heavy trucks loaded with troops and supplies. It was heavily defended and unarmed aircraft were defenseless. You did not go to the road unless you had to, and even then, you knew your life was in jeopardy. All types of American aircraft were used in the attempt to break the supply chain and the North Vietnamese reacted accordingly. A large quantity of the expended ordnance that went down also went up. The North Vietnamese Army took personal offense at being bombed and strafed. They responded with 23 and 37-millimeter guns that could knock down any type of aircraft. Increased firepower by the United States Air Force was badly needed.

One aircraft designed to meet this demand was the AC-130 Gun Ship. By the spring of 1971, eight aircraft were delivered to SEA with several modifications. The latest version carried two 20-mm Vulcan cannons, two 7.62 mini guns, and two 40-mm Bofors, all fixed mounted to the airframe. The rear 40-mm Bofor was replaced by a fixed mounted 105-mm howitzer by early 1972. It looked like a fire breathing monster when you watched it operate at night. No one would believe that anyone or anything would dare its wrath. Still, the aircraft was vulnerable and its mission was difficult.

These aircraft were designated with a call sign of Spectre, which accurately described its mission and capability. Spectre 22 launched out of Ubon, Thailand on March 30, 1972 and headed east toward the road. It carried a crew of 15. Each crewmember had a letter designation with "A" being the pilot and "B" the co-pilot and so on until "O," who was stationed near the tail. The attitude of the entire crew was serious and guarded. Everyone knew there were no survivors on the Spectre that went down the night before. There was probably vengeance on their mind but these were professionals. Their mission was to interdict traffic on the road, stop it in its tracks and return home safely. On this night it was going to be a longer than normal mission.

They were hit sometime around midnight. The co-pilot looked out his right side window and could see nothing but a sheet of flame engulfing the wing. It was obviously a mortal wound and he thought to himself, "My God, they've got another one." The aircraft commander ordered everyone to bail out. That was their only option. The co-pilot, running on 90% adrenaline and 10% seven-up, beat a path through a darkened aircraft and leaped out the back into a black night. He floated down in the dark and hit the ground on the very road he had been strafing. As luck would have it, there was no visible traffic and he found cover in some bushes while turning on his survival radio. Although he did not know it at the time, when ordered to bail out, he had passed several others when he made his exit.

Crewmember "M" floated down in close proximity, but on an elevated ridge a few hundred yards to the West.

An airborne command post scrambled from Korat RTAFB after the distress call and started coordinating appropriate aircraft. His call sign was King 27. Spectre one and Spectre 21 AC-130 Gun Ships, were in the area trying to raise any survivors on rescue radio frequencies. It had not been determined how many had survived. Spectre 21 provided as much information to King 27 as was available until relieved by Spectre 20. By this time, it had been determined there were survivors but the actual number was unknown. Spectre 20 had made radio contact with some survivors and learned that the aircraft had traveled some distance between being hit and bailing out. King 27 started to plan the on-scene operation with the assumption that most had gotten out of the aircraft and were potential survivors. His objective was to start a communication network and night visually search for as many as 15 men in preparation for a night recovery or a first light attempt.

Thence began the largest and most complex combat rescue operations ever attempted in the Vietnam War. King 27 requested multiple FAC. (Forward Air Control) aircraft with a call sign of "Nail" to over fly the target area and attempt communication on each of the four rescue frequencies. Allocating one frequency to each of four Nail FACS as they arrived on scene, he began a nightlong process of gathering information and eventually made radio contact with all 15 crewmembers. Since the on-scene time was limited for each FAC. by his fuel endurance, a cycling of aircraft was necessary. Replacement aircraft had to enter the subject area to continue the operation after being briefed. Concurrently, King had obtained fighter-bomber resources to orbit awaiting a possible need to deliver ordinance on enemy forces, which might compromise the safety of the survivors.

As the night progressed and more survivor locations were detected, SAR forces were launched from Nakhon Phanom and DaNang in case rescue attempts could be made before first light. These included Jolly Green helicopters using LNRS (Limited Night Recovery System) techniques (night vision goggles) and A-1 Sky Raiders for close air support. Because of the scope of this rescue operation, all airborne resources ( SAR, fighter-bombers, FACS of all sorts) were made available for this mission. Additionally, Air America helicopter resources were requested to aid in the effort.

Bruce Jachens had been operating a UH34D all day out of Savannakhet a few miles to the North. He had settled in for the night at the L-39 Air America hostel when the call came for him to launch south. Bruce was a veteran pilot with Air America and had been called upon several times to rescue downed military pilots. Normally though, it was done during daylight hours. A night rescue in hostile territory is dangerous and you stand the chance of having to be rescued yourself. Almost all of southern Laos was hostile territory and going to the road at night; well . . . you may stand a chance of being rescued if you survived but there were no guarantees. Bruce talked it over with his Filipino flight mechanic and both said "What the hell" and headed south in H-59.

Just north of Pakse, he joined up with a helicopter from Pakse. H-45 was crewed by Cates, Frady and Nakamoto. They had been working out of Pakse for the last several days. There was no moon and it was blacker than the inside of a cave. Flying night formation without any reference to the ground is not a piece of cake. As luck would have it, both aircraft were ordered to maintain radio silence and stand by. In this case, standing by meant flying in a circle in a virtual Inkpot.

King 27 learned that two survivors had exited the aircraft shortly after it was hit and they were located approximately 40 miles east of the main congregation of survivors. These two were in deep trouble. King 27 did not know it but the rest were in an area of relative safety. He assigned support to this secondary SAR area to determine as much information as

possible. Now they had, in effect, a SAR within a SAR. Since the threat to the two survivors on the road was unknown, King decided that as long as their situation was stable, he would concentrate the search and rescue efforts in the area with 13 known survivors. He would delay the East Side pickups until the primary area recovery operations were underway. By doing this, King hoped to avoid complications, which would happen if the East Side recovery went bad.

Now that all the crewmembers had been identified, it was decided to wait until first light to pick them up. The two Air America aircraft were told to stand down and they headed to Pakse to secure for the night. It was well after midnight by the time the two Air America crews got to bed. They had no way of knowing about all the preparation and assumed the Air Force was doing its thing without them. Bruce arose early, breakfasted and had the Air America cook prepare a bag lunch for later. He did not know at the time that he would be sharing his lunch.

The nightlong effort consisted of every SAR aircraft in Southeast Asia, over 100 in all. This enabled the Jollies and Sandies to begin their coordinated recovery of the 13 men located on the West Side. It soon became apparent that the men were more closely grouped than originally thought. The carefully laid plans to divide the survivors to different Jolly/Sandy teams quickly unraveled. As soon as one Jolly started in for a hover over a known location for one survivor, another survivor would make his presence known in the vicinity by radio transmission. This would happen again and again until all 13 men were safely picked up by at least four different Jollies. It truly was an Easter egg hunt and with Easter Sunday just around the corner on April 2nd, it was a blessing as well.

Before Bruce could head back to L-39 the Pakse customer advised him that he and the crew of H-45 were needed to rescue the two survivors on the road. Once the main group of 13 was in the process of recovery King had released the East Side recovery and asked for assistance from Air America. A Nail FAC., Raven and two Sandies were also dispatched. The situation was tense and urgent. During the night, a lone pedestrian had been spotted close to "B" and King had ordered an air strike in that area. It was well assured the enemy knew there were survivors on the ground and had a good idea of their location. It was also probable they knew someone would come to pick them up . . . unless they got to them first.

Bruce was flying as a single pilot since he had been working L-39 and that station did not require two pilots. H-45 continued with the same crew from the night before. Half way to the pickup zone Bruce experienced a battery fire. His flight mechanic put it out burning his hand in the process. Normally, that would be cause for aborting, but Bruce and his flight mechanic agreed to finish the job and kept going.

Arriving in the zone, contact was made with both crewmembers. No one hesitated. They needed to get in and out as soon as possible. Bruce held his altitude and acted as SAR for H-45 who picked up "B" uneventfully. As soon as H-45 was safely up and away, Bruce descended to pick up "M" while H-45 acted as his SAR.

The UH-34D was primitive by most helicopter standards even at this date. The engine was a radial design with nine huge cylinders. At sea level it developed 1525 horsepower at 2800 RPM and 56.5 inches of manifold pressure. It was a basic stick and rudder aircraft with a hot rod engine. However, as a helicopter, it had a collective and a hand twist throttle, which made it mechanically more difficult to fly than an airplane. The controls are servo assisted, but any movement on any control, be it rudder, cyclic control stick, collective or throttle required a corresponding adjustment on the other controls. Veteran H-34 pilots learned to utilize the energy in the rotor system to their advantage in mountainous terrain. Failure to do

so left many of these birds broke and burned in the rocks. RPM is the staff of life in a helicopter and in the H-34, you guarded it religiously.

Bruce's pickup was more difficult than H-45. The survivor was located near a ledge and Bruce had to hover over him in close proximity with the ridge. On a flat surface, a helicopter will benefit from a cushion of air formed from the down draft of the rotor system. The weight capacity while hovering in ground effect is far higher than hovering out of ground effect. The elevation was not terribly high, but any elevation decreases the horsepower of the Wright Cyclone. Bruce could see he would not have benefit of ground effect due to the uneven terrain. He also had another problem. The survivor's chute was right next to him and the rotor wash would cause it to billow up into the blades. He had to make a pass and motion to him to get clear of the chute. He made his approach into the wind and reduced his airspeed while simultaneously increasing manifold pressure as he descended. This act required increasing the throttle to 2800 RPM and offsetting the torque increase with rudder. He could sense the helicopter could safely hover and arrived over the survivor with full power and zero airspeed.

Now Bruce had to hold his position while checking to see that his RPM was held constant and there was power to spare to prevent settling in to the ridge or on the survivor. At this point Bruce was oblivious to any other activity and could not be concerned even if fired upon. The safety of the survivor depended upon him holding an exact position. On cue, the flight mechanic lowered the hoist and collar. All the survivor had to do was place the collar around him and wait to be hoisted up. He was understandably apprehensive.

Most of his adult life had been spent in the Air Force. He had been schooled about rescue techniques and knew almost instinctively how to react. All of his schooling was with people in Air Force uniforms and with aircraft with Air Force insignia. He was looking up at a pilot that could pass for a Russian and an oriental flight mechanic in civilian uniform. On top of that, the helicopter was obviously antiquated and was void of visible markings. Who were these people? Where's my people?

Bruce had his hands full of controls and knew he was a sitting duck for anyone with a slingshot, much less, a 23 or 37-millimeter gun. It was time to get the hell out of there and the survivor had to make a decision. There was no way to talk and explain due to the hover height and the noise. Finally, reason set in and the survivor placed the hoist around him and allowed himself to be hauled upward and aboard.

Now safely airborne Bruce joined up with H-45 and they both headed west for safety. Bruce asked the flight mechanic, "How's our passenger doing?" "He looks a little white around the gills" he replied. Bruce reached over and grabbed one of the sandwiches the cook had made for him that morning and handed it down him. "Give him one of these." Leaning over to the frightened survivor, he handed him the sandwich and said with a smile welcome to Air America.

This completed the successful recovery of all 15 crewmembers. The act will go down in history as the largest successful aircrew recovery of the entire war.

Acknowledgements:

Donna M. (Tison) Inman was the wife of one of the survivors. He is now deceased. At first, she thought Air America had rescued her husband. We later found out that he had been with the larger group. Her letters to me prompted this story.

David J. Preston was King 27. His letter to Donna provided information about the coordination effort

Bruce Jachens is now living in Florida. He was recently married and his wife Carolyn attended the last reunion. Welcome aboard Carolyn.

Chuck Frady is now deceased. Chuck was an excellent pilot and if he was ever unnerved, I never saw it. His assistance that night was well appreciated.

Jimmy Nakamoto was a Japanese-American. His whereabouts are unknown. I flew with him several times and always enjoyed his company and appreciated his expertise.

Judy Porter took the time to take my ramblings and edit it into a good story. She has my sincere thanks.