

Reluctant Rescue on the Ho Chi Minh Trail - Cook
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By: Roger Cook

Hal Miller and I were working out of Savanaket flying an H-34 helicopter. It was almost sundown and we were heading back, a long hard day. Then "Cricket" or "Moonbeam" (an airborne communications C-130) called. "Could we attempt a pick-up of a downed USAF A-7 pilot due east of Pakse on the Ho Chi Minh Trail?" We look at the sun! We looked at our fuel!

Miller: "Not enough gas to go there and back, and it would be a night pick-up by the time we got there. (Well, as those of you who knew Hal Miller, he has only one gear, go!) No reverse gear at all. He was like a dog with a bone when it came to "dramas". He just had to do it! He also had a temper ... a real bad temper ... as I soon learned.)

Cricket: "We have voice communications with the downed pilot. (That cemented the deal! So off we go.)

Miller: "Give me a heading to the area and get started on the fuel rendezvous deal." A southeast heading we took. I radioed Pakse to insure that "Cricket" didn't sand bag us. I check my M-16 and prepared for the unknown as best I could anticipate it. Knowing that this pilot was probably real close to the guns that bagged him. Looked like another drama to me and it was, but not like I thought.

It got darker, like only the tropics can. No visible horizon, on instruments. Droning onwards to whatever. Lost in our own thoughts we didn't say much, rethinking previous rescues and all the what "ifs". Fuel, nighttime, terrain, fuel, enemy, the Trail. All the stuff that you think you have covered. Constant factors that have to be dealt with. PLUS the fact that this pilot had been down for more than the "safe harbor time" (the 20 minutes we preferred to operate in). From past experience the 20-minute window was the optimum time to rescue a pilot. This seemed to be true as it took the Bad Buys that amount of time to react fully. We've got to get lucky on this one.

The terrain east of Pakse over to the Trail/S.Vietnam was generally flatter (in comparison to the rest of Laos) except where the "trail" was. Jungle there, tall, tall trees, triple canopied trees that had enemy, 12.7's and 23mm anti-aircraft guns just waiting for us. Cricket vectored us to the general area and we tried radio contact. "Beeper, beeper ... come up voice." "Beeper, beeper ... come up voice."

AF Pilot: "Hello - over" Thank goodness! We've found him I thought. Now comes the fun/weird part.

Miller: "This is Hotel 4 1, were are you from us - over.

AF Pilot: "I shackel" (He reads off a string of letters here.)

Miller: "I don't have time for this shackel stuff We are low on fuel, tell us where you are so we can pick you up. Do you have an TIC (troops in contact) - over?"

AF Pilot: "No telling you! How do I know that you are not a North Vietnamese chopper - over? No TIC - over." Incredulous we took at each other dumbfounded. What the hell is going on here? Then Miller got mad, really mad.

Miller: "Listen here you dumb SOB, if you want to get your rotten a picked up cut the crap and tell us where you are - over!"

AF Pilot: I'm not sure who you are, got to be sure, people on the ground looking for me, I guess (shaky, stressed out voice here) over." That really ripped it. Thought he said no TIC, some- body's lying here.

Miller: "Now, you tell me, now, (you stupid SOB), where you are now, or we are leaving, we are low on fuel. On cue, that red, "notoriously inaccurate" nickel sized low-fuel level light came on flooding the cockpit with a blood

red light. It looked as big as a #9 washtub. I reached forward, unscrewed it and took the bulb out and threw it away. We had 30 minutes of fuel left, may be?

Cook: (In my best southern accent, I tried my luck with this scared pilot.) "Tell us where you are, we are out of fuel, this is your last chance or we have to go!" Bear in mind, it is dark, flying instruments in erratic circles trying to spot this pilot's light or something at about 1000' AGL, 30 minutes of fuel left and so frustratingly close to the pick-up of a reluctant pilot who would not cooperate. We weren't sure of the situation on the ground. Hell he could have been a North Vietnamese for all we knew. He was scared, Hal was scared, Jimmy our flight mechanic was scared and I was scared. We didn't want to leave him but there are three of us to his one and the pucker was setting in, big time! All of the facts were scrambled. We were literally in the dark. This guy was no help at all (maybe he was a NVA), and the NVA were down there waiting with deadly patience and silence. Where is he? Where are the NVA? Is it a trap?

AF Pilot: (After more talking nonsense and using up precious time.) "OK I hear you, fly this way -over."

Cook: "Which way, dammit?"

AF Pilot: "Uh-left, no, uh right. Come towards me." Now Hal was really getting madder and madder.

Miller: "Listen up stupid, vector us to you by our sound - now - or you are going to sleep in this jungle tonight. Now, dammit, now!"

AF Pilot: "I can hear you, but your sound is bouncing around down here, can't tell really where you are."

Cook to Miller: "All we got left is our lights, landing, hover, and running lights. We have to use them, take the chance of getting hit, or leave now! This could be a trap.

Miller: OK, turn them on and pray." I turned all of them on (4 hover lights and the main three million candlepower light). Talk about bright. Every NVA on the trail could hear us, and now they could see us. So this is how a sitting duck feels? We had about 20 minutes of fuel left now. He saw us! He started vectoring us to himself! Jimmy our Hawaiian/Japanese flight mechanic got the jungle penetrator ready to run down on the hoist. Hal was hovering, about 300 plus feet. Trees were tall here. He got a slight case of vertigo, lights and all, so I hovered till he got his ear/eyes right.

Jimmy: "I see him. He is on the penetrator. Bringing him up!" It is as he is ascending when he looks up and sees an oriental face illuminated by the green starboard light. Now bear in mind again that this pilot thought at first that we were a NVA copter. And I instantly remembered that Jimmy looked very oriental. Didn't say anything because hovering is touchy, especially when there is a man on the hoist and I didn't want to distract Hal and Jimmy.

Jimmy: "Almost in the door." As the reluctant rescuee was riding up the hoist he looked up as he came to the door. "Yep, just as I thought" he thought, when he spotted Jimmy's face! These SOB's are NVA! I am out of here! So I'll jump and take my chances on the ground." So he did, except Jimmy grabbed him and pulled him inside the H-34. Then silence. Then the fight broke out. We could hear the grunting and scuffling. "Got him - go! Go! Go! Then more silence and scuffling. The aircraft was rocking! Immediately we high-tailed it westward. Grateful that not one round had been fired at us. Yes, we got lucky!

Called "Cricket" mission complete. Called out Pakse tankers and set up the rendezvous. We had about 10 to 15 minutes of fuel left.

Miller: "Jimmy, what the hell was going on down there?"

Jimmy: "The SOB tried to jump off the penetrator! I grabbed him first and drug him inside. He fought me so I cold cocked him with my pistol."

Miller: "Put that lousy SOB on the customer headset." Then Hal commenced the best ass chewing I believe I've ever heard. Hal reamed him out from A to Z. Did a real fine job. This pilot apologized and said he was scared. (Read panic.)

The intercom became real quiet now. Each of us reflecting on what just happened and resumed our normal breathing. Hal just got madder. I felt a tugging on my pant leg, looked down and saw a piece of paper held by a shaking hand. Reached down, took it, and couldn't believe my eyes! I started laughing; it was a personal check. Yes the pilot had his checkbook with him on a mission! The amount was about \$8,000 as I recall. Hal grabbed the piece of paper I was laughing at and exploded over the intercom. "What the hell is this?"

AF Pilot: "I know you guys get \$ 1 0,000 each for picking me up. This is all I have in checking, will get you the balance after I get back to LJBON (AFB)." I thought I had seen Hal mad during the pick-up on the trail but now he was very, very angry!! I thought he was going to have a stroke. He called that pilot every name he could think of, ass chewing #2. The pilot got a word in when Hal came up for air. He was sobbing, saying that he appreciated what we had done and that he was sorry. Sorry! Hal "exploded" Sorry! The pilot tried to apologize again and asked what was the matter, that he had apologized.

Miller: "It isn't enough money, that's what the matter. You cheap SOB. I am taking you back and shoving you out. You cheap Charlie." And then Hal does a 180-degree turn! I tried to wrestle control from him, pointing furiously at the fuel gauge. Thankfully he relented and turned back to Pakse. We had Jimmy unplug the headset downstairs so the pilot couldn't hear us talking to our "tankers". Hal took that check, tore it up and threw it out the window! Dammit Hal, what are you doing? I could have used that. You know much Baht that is?

Adrenaline rush notwithstanding I wanted this dark, dark night to be over. I was tired of fighting these two. We were lucky, don't push it! Arrangements made with our "tankers" via radio and with a flash of our and the tankers landing lights we started our descent to land out in the middle of no-where. Dark, dark. Maybe a little starlight.

Hal had Jimmy put the pilot back on the headset. Hal told him that he (Hal) had had enough of his bull and was landing to put him out, alone, in Indian country. He could make his own way home from there. (Revenge is so sweet.) We landed, shut down, Hal went to the belly door, grabbed the pilot, pulled him roughly to the ground, told him to keep his mouth shut and gave his to me. I lead him aft about 30 yards or so, made him sit on the ground and "stood guard" over him. Man it sure was quiet out there, but even though I wanted to whack him, I

dared not. The sounds would carry. Meanwhile, the drums of fuel were rolled to our bird and refueling commenced. Finished, we boarded, including the AF pilot and flew to Pakse.

The story doesn't end here folks, there is more. At Pakse the AF Pilot Retrieval Team (i.e. guys from his own squadron) met us and whisked our SOB away. Hal, Jimmy and I put our bird to bed and went to the Raven Club where the "party" was going on. Drinks for everybody! Congratulations everywhere! The AF SOB, his back to the bar, elbows hooked there raising his glass, holding "court" before his fellow squadron mates, recounting how brave he was and how he "fought them off" using his survival skills, single handily, blah, blab, blab (ad-nausium). AF eyes rolled upward, evidently this pilot we picked up was not the sharpest knife in their drawer and not very popular in his own squadron.

A Raven came to us three and asked why we brought him back? I thought Hal had calmed down by now, no way! He was just simmering, hot still. The Raven asked if the pilot had bought us a drink? No, not yet, we replied. How about the obligatory bottle of whiskey customarily proffered. No, not yet, sipping the drinks the Raven brought us, courtesy of the USAF. Another Raven brought the pilot for introductions to his rescuers. He declined the introductions, ignoring us!!! Well that ripped it again! Hal really exploded again. Hal tried to hit him as I recall, but was stymied by others. Hal tried to drag that SOB outside, calling to Jimmy and me to get our bird ready. We were going to take him back, and throw him out! I was in agreement! Cooler heads prevailed and the party broke up. Wish I had that check.

Then we all had more drinks (medicinal purposes of course).