

The First Day of the Rest of Their Lives - The Survival of an A-6 Crew  
By LaDonne McCarthy

"It was the first day of the rest of my life. I thought it at the time and I still think it now," said RADM Don Eaton in describing the events of 14 July 1965 when he and his pilot, RADM Donald V. Boecker, flew the number-two aircraft in a flight of two A-6A Intruders assigned to bomb a small bridge near Sam Neua in Northern Laos.

Back in those days, the two men were squadron mates in VA-75, the first operational Intruder squadron, assigned to Air Wing Seven on board USS Independence (CVA-62). Young and aggressive, the pair had already flown several combat missions over South and North Vietnam, with Boecker as pilot and Eaton as Bombardier/Navigator, since joining the ship only a few weeks earlier.

Though he was well aware of the inherent danger of their mission, Boecker later reflected that those earlier missions over the South were not at all what he expected. "I expected to see bullets coming up or missiles," he said. "but on my first combat mission over South Vietnam, I didn't have anybody shooting at me and it was almost like flying a practice training mission over the coast of Virginia."

Though their early days with the squadron were almost anticlimactic, the Vietnam War was heating up, and the pair was about to take center-stage in an 18-hour drama which would have them literally running for their lives. Ironically, Boecker and Eaton, who were roommates at the time, were not originally slated to fly 14 July and it was not until Eaton persuaded the flight schedules officer to put them on the roster that the duo was actually scheduled.

Shortly after takeoff and rendezvous, a system went down on the lead aircraft, piloted by LCDR Bill Ruby, and he passed the lead to Boecker. Because of a shortage of bombs, Boecker's aircraft was carrying five Mk 82 500-lb. bombs, one on each station. Boecker led the flight to the target—a bridge over a river which was part of the notorious Ho Chi Minh trail—at roughly 25,000 ft., arriving at Sam Neua about 1800. After arming the bombs, Boecker began his roll-in from 19,000 ft. and pickled on target as briefed. The bombs were set to arm four-and-a-half seconds after leaving the aircraft and detonate upon impact. However, shortly after Boecker pickled, a tremendous explosion rocked the aircraft. "One of the 500-lb. bombs had exploded prematurely underneath our wing," Boecker said. "It was more devastating than any missile or gunshot because it immediately knocked out one of our two engines."

"It sounded pretty bad," said Eaton. "Immediately as Don pulled out of the dive, both fire warning lights came on, the hydraulic gauges fluctuated and we started to lose pressure. The fuel gauges were also dropping rapidly, and as I looked to starboard, I could see great amounts of fuel streaming out of the wing. It looked like a very dense vapor trail of fuel, almost like a waterfall."

Boecker shut down the right engine, but the fire light remained on. With the beach approximately 153 miles away, there was little chance the aircraft could make it to the water. With options dwindling rapidly, Boecker pulled out of the dive and struggled to gain altitude. Amid all the confusion, Ruby radioed that the aircraft was on fire and instructed the pair to eject. Grasping the stick with both hands, Boecker desperately tried to lift the left wing, but the aircraft kept rolling. No longer denying the inevitable, Eaton lowered his ejection seat pan and took off his kneeboard. Moments later, as the aircraft continued to roll, Boecker reached over and slapped Eaton on the leg, a personal sign that it was time to eject.

The initial ejection shots were hard and firm; with ballistic seats, the crew's acceleration was almost instantaneous. Within seconds, the pair was drifting through space. The first to eject, Eaton severely bruised his hands on his way out of the airplane. and to make matters worse, his pistol, which he wore strapped in a holster in front of him, banged him hard in the mouth. Looking around, Eaton said he could see Boecker below him. In the last moments before landing, Eaton said he glanced in the direction of the aircraft and watched it hit the ground with a string of secondary explosions.

As they continued their drift downward, each man furiously calculated his plan of attack. Close enough to hear voices and see villagers pointing at them, the men tugged at their risers, desperately trying to steer to better landing sites. Unable to steer away from the center of a tiny village, a sudden gust of wind interceded on Boecker's behalf and carried him over a small hill about 200 yds. southeast of the village. Meanwhile, Eaton tried frantically to steer away from an impending rice paddy. He managed to avoid the paddy but landed south of Boecker on the far side of a large grassy hill. To make his misery even more complete, Eaton landed in tall grass which made it difficult to judge the distance to the ground. Consequently, he landed standing up which caused him to strain his back and dug the pistol into his stomach as well.

Forced to act immediately, the men set their escape plans into action. "I had to move fast," said Eaton. "I took off my helmet, ripped my nametag off and started to run. As I began running, my leg garters were clicking so I tossed them too. Instinctively, I started to go toward Don to make sure he was okay. But after traveling for a few minutes, I realized this was a bad idea because it was pretty far. I'm not making a lot of progress and I'm giving up time." Realizing the villagers were gaining on him, Eaton instead headed east as he had originally intended, reminding himself all the while that he had to go as far as he could, as fast as he could, for as long as he could.

Busy plotting his own course, Boecker had to make some quick decisions as well. Knowing he would not be able to make it to Eaton before the villagers caught up with him, he headed north toward a hill covered in a thick tangle of jungle undergrowth. Boecker recalled that in trying to grab his survival equipment out of his parachute seat pan, he had accidentally activated the nitrogen bottle that inflated his one-man life raft. "Frantically," he said, "I picked up the raft, and with the superhuman strength born of fear and adrenalin, ripped it apart and threw it aside. I tore it like it was paper. I've tried to do it since then and so have others, but no one could do it."

Hunted like animals and fearing for their lives, each man set out on his own course, literally throwing themselves down steep hills and small cliffs, crossing streams at different points to slow their pursuers while leaving as many false trails as possible. Fortunately, in addition to attending survival training in the States, the pair had received jungle survival training at the hands of Filipino instructors only a few weeks earlier and were well-versed in making their way through dense jungle terrain.

Looking back at his desperate run, Boecker said his mind was spitting out things he had learned in survival school like a computer. Both pilot and B/N agreed that their survival school training was invaluable during the episode because it not only gave them an idea of what to expect, it also gave them added incentive to do anything to avoid capture.

Because the undergrowth was so heavy, progress was slow for both men. Boecker recalls that at points the foliage seemed to form an impenetrable wall which forced him to double back on occasion. So thick was the vegetation that in hours of traveling, Eaton estimates that he only made about three-quarters of a mile from where he started.

Though traveling through the undergrowth was difficult, as the two men look back, they believe it contributed greatly to their ultimate survival. "It made it extremely difficult for Don and I to move," said Eaton, "I also recognize that I was running for my life and so was Don, but the people that were chasing us were not. If it was hard for us then it was very, very hard for them. I literally threw myself down some hills that were almost vertical, but I just rolled down and took my best shot because I knew those guys weren't going to do what I was willing to do."

As the chase continued, Boecker came across what looked to be the perfect hiding place—an abandoned animal den. He burrowed in the hole using underbrush for further cover. With only a few minutes to catch his breath, he heard the posse of 10-15 men approach. "They had found my chute and were actively looking for me," he said.

As darkness fell under the light of a full moon, Eaton too found a spot on the side of a hill beside a large tree. Figuring he could use the tree as a marker of his location in a rescue attempt, he bedded down for the night. From his lair, Eaton could hear the villagers shouting and saw the lights of their lanterns swinging back and forth. It was clear the search would continue throughout the night. He remembers that at one point the villagers got so close to him that he was afraid they would hear his heart pounding. Too on-edge to sleep, the men spent a long, lonely night burrowed inside their jungle hideouts.

Shortly before dawn, the men heard sounds of what seemed to be a large aircraft overhead. Sure enough, as the sun came up, they looked up to see a transport, the airborne rescue coordinator (a.k.a. "Victor Control"). Seeing the aircraft, both men began to call to it using their PC-49 survival radios. Even equipped with radios, the men were still at a disadvantage as Boecker's PC-49 could transmit but not receive and Eaton's could receive but not transmit. As the control aircraft orbited, it was joined by several A-1 Skyraiders and two helicopters. The aircraft flew overhead, spotting the terrain and trying to keep the enemy at bay. By this time it was about 0715. Though he had been transmitting for some time, Boecker still had received no reply from any of the aircraft. Finally, he asked the A-1s to rock their wings if they received his transmission. "They started rocking their wings immediately," he said, "and I felt a whole lot better right away."

Meanwhile, another of the helicopters flew toward Eaton. He transmitted that they were about to fly directly over him and that he would come out into the open for them to see his position. Though an air crewman waved at him, the helo kept right on going. "I was crestfallen," Eaton said. "I didn't know why they hadn't picked me up."

About two miles west of Eaton, Boecker's hopes for an early rescue were likewise dashed when the H-34 that had spotted him took several machine gun hits in its main fuel cell and, with fuel streaming out its sides, was forced to limp back to a safe base. Shortly after the failed rescue, Boecker heard the sound of a man approaching. Quickly, he crouched down on his stomach, hid amidst the deep undergrowth and watched in terror as the man walked within eight feet of him. "He was looking right at me," Boecker recalled. "I was petrified. I could feel my heart coming out of my chest. I'm sure he assumed I had a gun and was going to shoot him. I think he made a mental note of where I was and figured he'd come back for me with his buddies." Taking his cue, Boecker charged through the jungle knowing they'd be back shortly. Ironically, Boecker said that earlier he had decided not to carry a gun, and believes to this day that not having a gun saved his life. "If I'd had a gun," he said, "I would have shot him, and I would have been caught immediately," Boecker said he decided not to carry a gun after reading the debrief of a friend, now VADM Paul Ilg, who had gone down in Northern Laos a few weeks earlier. Ilg had not carried a gun and attributed his survival directly to the fact that he had not had one. Eaton carried a gun, but later said it was the last time he would ever do so.

While Boecker ran for his life, Eaton did a great deal of moving that morning as well. Above, a Skyraider dove and fired its four 20mm cannons. A tremendous commotion resulted with noise roaring up the valley and lots of secondary explosions and gunfire. As he was smack in the middle of the target area, Eaton feared he would be accidentally strafed. Adding to the confusion, the A-1's wingman rolled in firing rockets. More aircraft arrived and, in the midst of all the chaos, Eaton made a play up the hill for a better rescue position, trading his jungle cover for short grass and wide-open spaces. Though he knew it was risky, "Eaton fired a smoke flare but was unsure whether it was seen by any of the aircraft passing overhead. Suddenly, a T-28 that was flying nearby broke and headed, no more than two or three propeller widths off the ground, straight toward him. Thinking he was about to be hit, Eaton threw himself on the ground. To his surprise, the T-28 flew by him, rolled up on a wingtip while a man in the back seat waved. As the aircraft flashed by, a UH-34D appeared behind it. Knowing his hands were in no condition to endure a ride in a horse collar, Eaton jumped for the helo as it hovered. With Eaton safely aboard the chopper, the aircraft headed left toward Boecker, who at this point was encircled by the enemy.

The scene was tense, with all sorts of aircraft - helicopters (including an Air Force Jolly Green), two T-28s, a Caribou and the Skyraiders filling the sky. At times, Eaton watched as the daring T-28 pilots flew below the helicopters. In the meantime, hidden deep in the undergrowth, Boecker was sure the aircraft would have difficulty spotting him. In a last ditch effort, he transmitted that the next time the caravan flew over him, he would light a smoke flare. Upon seeing the flare, a crewman on one of the helos waved but the helo kept right on going. With the Skyraiders pulverizing the village, Boecker nervously charged for more open ground. Crashing his way out of the jungle, he made his way to a large tree and transmitted his location. The helo arrived immediately and lowered its collar, but the sling kept getting caught in the tree. When it finally came close to Boecker (still about three feet above him and downhill), he dropped his remaining survival gear and made a frantic leap for the collar.

Up in the helo, Eaton watched as the hoist was pulled in. "I was getting really nervous because I didn't see Don," he said. "Then I didn't see anyone in the horse collar and I thought 'My God, they didn't get him.' As it came up a little more, I could see a bit of a branch and then a little bit more and there was Don with his arm barely through the sling, dangling at about 2,000 ft. (above the ground) under a helo moving about 60 kts."

When Boecker was finally hoisted aboard the aircraft, the pair embraced in a joyous reunion - almost 19 hours after the start of their ill-fated flight.

Looking back on the episode, both men say it was an eye-opening experience which changed their lives forever. "Never before and never since have I put out my total physical capability," said Eaton. "I reached out and did things beyond what I ever thought I could do. I sustained my stamina and put exhaustion out of my mind.

"Also, my mental processes were absolutely pristine - anything that was superfluous was immediately rejected. I had no disassociated thoughts. It was one of those times where you thought clearly, logically, progressively and objectively."

As witnessed by his encounter with the life raft, Boecker too said he experienced a similar outpouring of strength and a steely mindset for survival that allowed him to displace fear and get on with the task at hand. "I remember just about every minute of my 18-and-a-half hours," he said. "I didn't sleep. I wasn't hungry, wasn't thirsty. I didn't even think about those things. My adrenalin was pumping at tremendous rates."

Not only did the encounter ensure that each man performed at the limits of human capacity, it also resolidified already powerful feelings of patriotism. "I was so pleased and proud to be

an American," said Boecker. "They put forth such a big rescue attempt with combined forces from Air America, the Air Force and the Navy. They probably used about a million dollars worth of fuel, bombs and bullets, not to mention the aircraft that were shot up trying to rescue us. It made me proud to be an American and to know that our country would use so many assets to rescue two Navy flyers."

"From the time that my parachute opened until I saw all of those airplanes, that was the loneliest I've ever been in my life," recalled Eaton. "I was alone in a combat area in the middle of a strange world. I was totally isolated-almost detached from humanity. When those airplanes arrived in the morning, I saw the big hand of Uncle Sam and the United States reaching out and trying to take care of me. It was an extremely uplifting experience.

Each year since, on the anniversary of their terrifying 18-and-a-half hour ordeal, the two men have made a point of getting together to celebrate their deliverance from San Neua. Whether in person, by telegram or telephone, they have managed to make contact on 25 consecutive July 14th. This year, to mark their 25th anniversary, Eaton, who now serves as the assistant commander for Naval Aviation Depots at the Naval Air Systems Command, traveled to Patuxent River for a celebratory reunion. Joined by W. Ralph Clarke, an old friend and Grumman technical representative who was in Independence at the time of the incident and their wives, Boecker and Eaton happily celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first day of the rest of their lives.

Incidentally, it was only last October that the two men again met Sam Jordan, the humble but heroic UH-34D pilot who performed the daring rescues in the midst of enemy territory.

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