

Leave No Man Behind

George Galdorisi & Thomas Phillips

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Part IV-9 Indian Summer Navy Late '66

On 14 September, 1966, an Air Force F-105 from the 421st TFS, was damaged attacking a bridge 15 miles north of Hanoi. Knowing the plane would not make it home, the pilot, First Lieutenant John R. Casper, had the option to go west and go down in relatively remote jungle in scarcely populated western North Vietnam somewhere in the 275 miles between Hanoi and the nearest point of the Thailand border, or try for the ocean only 80 miles to the east. Perhaps a factor in his decision was that he had been shot down the month before and had been rescued from the jungle of southern North Vietnam after trying to get west back to Thailand. He'd already done that. He went east, skirting north of the heavily defended Haiphong area, but did not quite make it far enough. His Thud gave up on him just beyond the mainland and he parachuted down among the innermost row of the Fai Tsi Long archipelago, still deep in enemy territory.

A section of Navy A-1 Skyraiders, led by Lieutenant Martin E. Demke, II arrived over Casper in the nick of time, rocketing and strafing enemy boats which had put out to capture him. They also strafed the gun sites lining the shore which were surrounding the two Spads with tracers.

An SH-3A from HS-6 responded to the mayday and approached the outer island chain in company with an Air Force HU-16. As the pair approached the outer row of islands, the Big Mother, commanded by Lieutenant Willard. P. Matthews, with copilot Lieutenant Commander Leon P. Hoglum beside him, decided to penetrate the islands low on the deck. The HU-16 went in higher, and both were engaged by a hail of gunfire from the heavily defended islands. Matthew's gunners, both AX3s, Chester M. Wood and Donald L. Stanford, opened fire, each on the nearest island on their side of the selected penetration point. By going in low, the island mass itself blocked the fire of some guns, while the unfortunate HU-16 was engaged by many more and turned away in the face of such strong opposition. Wood and Stanford were effective in momentarily suppressing enough opposing fire for the helicopter to pass between the islands. They were not free from continued enemy fire, but the range opened and the likelihood of taking a hit decreased as they transited eight miles to the next row of islands.

Approaching the next barrier of islands, the situation was a bit more hairy; the islands in this chain were much closer together and the barrage of fire was too much for Matthews and Hougum, and they broke off their approach. Matthews called Demke, the RESCORT leader, to coordinate some support to see if they could break in through the inner barrier. Timing their strafing runs to the charge of Big Mother, Demke and his wingman dove on the enemy guns with cannon fire as the helicopter raced past, its machine guns adding to the suppressive fire of the rugged Skyraiders.

Continuing in towards the mainland, Big Mother transited another six miles under fire to the raft, only 300 yards from the island just off the mainland. Fortunately, this island was not heavily fitted with guns, being protected by the outer two barriers. But the islanders had automatic weapons and the small arms posed as much threat at this short range as the coastal guns and AAA did on the ride in. Again the Skyraiders strafed the enemy on the island while Big Mother picked up the helpless Lieutenant Casper. Despite a mechanical malfunction that forced them to operate the hoist in an emergency mode, requiring Chet Wood and Dan Stanford to coordinate, leaving the defensive guns unmanned, Casper was hoisted aboard with dispatch. Matthews broke out of his sitting duck posture quickly and turned tail to the nearby island. Now all they had to do is repeat the forced entry process across the water in the reverse sequence. They took the identical path back out, hoping that some of the defenders had been taken out of the fight and others had been convinced not to put up such a strong fight the second time. Both gunners and Skyraiders shot furiously as they passed the two choke points the second time, and broke through without taking any hits. They had traveled 30 miles under continuous fire, taking 35 minute to do it.