

Leave No Man Behind

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Part IV-9 Indian Summer Navy Late '66

On the Fourth of July, *Connie's* VA-155 Lieutenant Neil E. Holben was attacking patrol boats 15 miles east of Cat Ba in the outermost islands of Fai Tsi Long, when the patrol boats got the better of his A-4 and he had to eject, coming down about a half mile from one of the small islands. Commander Lockwood was flying the North SAR station that day. Vectored to the scene, he followed an Air Force "crab crusher" (HU-16) which flew into a crossfire approaching Holben's position, dropped a smoke marker at the closest point of approach and veered away, enemy fire pursuing it. Lockwood and crew arrived to find Holben's raft between two islands, whose garrisons were dropping mortar rounds and spraying automatic weapons fire towards the raft. Holben was not abandoning his raft like he should because he was injured. Lockwood, knowing how the rotor wash can blow around the raft, and knowing that time in a hover was against them all, decided to land in the choppy seas to speed things up (the SH-3A is designed for water operations, prudently: not for rescue, but to survive an engine failure while hovering to use its dipping sonar to hunt submarines).

He skillfully settled the Sea King down beside the raft, placing the aircraft between the raft and the nearest hostile island. Before they could grab Holben, the heavy seas dashed the raft against the side of the helicopter, spilling the injured Holben out of the raft. AX1 Thomas S. Goen, one of the two crewmen, immediately jumped into the ocean to secure the injured man and assist him into the rescue hoist. Disregarding the splashes of automatic weapons fire, Goen coolly helped Holben into the rescue sling. As ADJ1 Vincent F. Vicari hoisted Holben toward the cabin door the rotor wash and the choppy sea pushed Tom Goen behind the helicopter and out of sight of Vicari. The crewman's intercommunication station chose this moment to go down, and Vicari had to rush forward and yell to the copilot, Lieutenant Junior Grade John "Ollie" Donelan, that he has lost sight of Goen behind them. On hearing this development, Lockwood immediately pulled the helicopter up out of the sea, and broke the hover, departing the spot and drawing the fire with him. They came around in a 180-degree turn, Donelan sighted Goen already a few hundred yards from the residual rotor wash still marking the previous hover, and Lockwood immediately angled in, descended to a low, ten-foot, hover over Goen, with Vince Vicari talking the helicopter precisely to where Goen could reach the hoist hook. Goen quickly hooked himself up, and Big Mother rapidly cleared the area as Vicari reeled him in, chased by the splashes of hostile fire.