

# Leave No Man Behind

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## Part IV-9 Indian Summer Navy Late '66

(On 7 July 1966), Lieutenant Ron Clarke's crew was orbiting at North SAR, whiling away the time awaiting their third HIFR refueling by letting the gunners take turns flying while one of the pilots rested in the cabin. Not only were they battling boredom, the pilots were fighting fatigue and dehydration. In the mostly glass cockpit, under the "greenhouse" upper canopy windows, the air temperature was exceeding 40°C (104°F), and the nomex flight suit and gloves, survival vest, Mae West life preserver, and heavy ballistic helmet were blocking air and stimulating copious sweat. Copilot Lieutenant Junior Grade Jerry Smith was stretching in the back, out of the merciless sun, while ADJ2 George Armstrong was getting some stick time in the right pilot seat under the close supervision of Clarke. As an Air America pilot, Clarke's life had been saved by similar precautionary training when he, the sole pilot of his H-34, was taken violently ill from the delayed effects of a concussion, and his observer had flown back to safety; making him a firm believer in providing at least some flight training for his crewmen. The boredom of the airborne sauna was suddenly rent by chaos on the guard frequency; a cripple was coming out over Haiphong, headed their way. Armstrong hastily gave up the pilot seat to Smith, and Clarke turned the helicopter toward Haiphong. Flying into the outer harbor, up ahead, beyond the beach, they could see a parachute floating down, and an A-4 taking its final plunge. Clarke and crew continued across the outer harbor, into the mouth of the eastern shipping channel and found themselves in a wider area behind the entry, about a mile wide shore to shore. Clarke could see the downed man, not far from a number of junks which began to move toward him.

With no time to waste, Clarke asked the leader of the jets overhead for some suppression support. He was advised that all the planes were out of ordnance, having expended it all at the target. Clarke determined to go in anyway, and gave over the flight controls as soon as Smith had donned his "chicken plate" armored vest. He then discovered they were short one vest when he asked AX3 Jimmy Conrad to hand him one. While jets made dry runs to bluff the approaching junks, Smith descended low enough to drag the extended rescue hoist through the water to ground the hook and dissipate the static electricity charge before the downed pilot grabbed it. As he pulled the cyclic stick back into his lap to decelerate the helicopter into a hover, before he could bring the helicopter to a stop, he ran out of aft-stick authority when the stick banged against the chicken plate over his Mae West.

"I can't hold it" he yelled as the chopper coasted past the man in the water. Clarke grabbed the controls and accelerated into a left 270-degree turn to return to the man in the water. Smith hastily discarded the chicken plate, and, as the Big Mother

approached a hover, regained the controls from Clarke and established a steady hover with no further problems with stick authority. As soon as Conrad reported the man in the sling, Clarke called:

“Let’s get the hell outta here!” and Smith rocked the nose forward and transitioned into forward flight. He accelerated away, turning for open water, achieving over 100 knots even before Conrad could reel in the A-4 pilot. By the time Armstrong had him pulled inside the cabin, his flight suit was dry. The pickup was made just ahead of enemy junks which closed to within 1000 yards before the rescue helo made its escape. As they fled the harbor, Clarke noticed an A-1 tucked in close aboard to starboard, looked to port and saw the same thing. No round could hit them thanks to the protective aluminum shield provided by the SPADs. Once beyond hostile weapons range, the Skyraiders waggled their wings and broke for home.

The Big Mothers headed for the PIRAZ cruiser, which had a doctor aboard to have their new friend, VA-216’s Lieutenant Commander William Isenhour, checked out. When Isenhour discovered this news, he objected forcefully: this had been USS *Hancock*’s last combat strike, and she was headed for the States. He was not about to miss that trip. The HS-6 crew agreed and were treated to a wonderfully exciting reunion moment as soon as they landed aboard the carrier. A very large group of squadron mates, and shipmates, triumphantly celebrated this happy ending of their combat line period and the deployment’s last combat mission. *Hancock* was going home... with Bill Isenhour.

To pull off a rescue in broad daylight from the outer channel of the Haiphong harbor area without taking fire must be attributed to the North Vietnamese not dreaming anyone would even try it, but it was done. The next one at Haiphong would not be so placid.