

Leave No Man Behind

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Part IV-9 Indian Summer Navy Late '66

(On) July 27th, an RF-4C from the 16th TRS was making a night photo run over Dong Hoi, about 10 miles north of the DMZ when the AA gunners, concentrated around the important town, found the range. Both airmen, pilot Captain Marvin C. Mayfield, and WSO First Lieutenant R.D. Clark ejected at low altitude. Mayfield found himself alone in the dark and had difficulty reaching anybody before finally establishing radio contact with a Marine F-4 who rustled up three B-57 Canberras to CAP him, and alerted everyone to the emergency. The downed reconnaissance airmen were only about three miles inland from the coast.

Lieutenant Ron Clarke and Lieutenant Junior Grade Jerry Smith, the pilots of Big Mother 70, were having breakfast in the wardroom of USS *Ranger* at about three in the morning when they were alerted to attempt the rescue. Taking off quickly from a pitching and rolling deck they were immediately on instruments as they proceeded for about an hour in solid overcast and steady rain toward the coast of North Vietnam, unable to even see the water as they flew.

Clarke contacted the Canberras, who would steer them to the downed men. The Air Force pilot asked them if they wanted an initial position reference point to use to begin navigation. Clarke replied in the affirmative and a B-57 dropped a bomb in the surf line as a visual mark. The exploding bomb was the first sighting of the ground/water during the flight to that point. Knowing the area was heavily defended with guns and SAMs, Clarke decided to climb to coast in at 3250 feet halfway between the 500-foot altitude increments the intelligence “weenies” reported the North Vietnamese gunners used for setting their fuses – 1500, 2000, 2500, 3000, 3500, etc.. 3250 would also put the helicopter above most small arms fire.

Approaching the coast, Ron Clarke called “Stiletto One” the callsign of Marvin Mayfield and asked for a short count, a continuous key of Mayfield’s survival radio, which would allow Jerry Smith to get a bearing on it with the radio direction finder. Clarke turned to the indicated heading.

As the blacked out helicopter crossed the beach, copilot Jerry Smith was looking down. He suddenly pulled himself back into his armored seat while keying the intercom and said:

“Here it comes.”

As he said that, tracers passed up the left side of the aircraft, so close it prompted Clarke to fear it was going to knock out his rotor system.

From the cabin, AX3 Jimmy Gene Conrad looked down on hundreds of fireflies all winking off and on all over the ground below them. In addition to the tremendous

number of smaller caliber tracers coming up, they suddenly started receiving very large caliber fire from the eleven o'clock position. Clarke maneuvered violently to avoid. The evasion was out of balanced flight and the skidding turn threw Conrad off his M-60 gun mount into the center of the cabin. Looking up through the front windshield, he saw the detonations of shells right in front of the helicopter. Clarke pulled back on the cyclic and the helicopter came to a virtual stop in the air, followed by another accelerating turn. As he jinked desperately, Clarke called out the gun to the Canberra leader, who directed one of his wingmen to attack the gun. The bomber dived below the helicopter and swooped to the gun position. A huge fireball of napalm blossomed and rolled forward. In the glare, Clarke could see a small shack just prior to it being destroyed. That gun was silenced. But one gun was only a drop in the bucket.

Conrad regained his feet just in time to be thrown toward the open cargo door, held in the aircraft only by his gunner's belt. Hanging out the door he could see streams of tracers criss-crossing in front of the helicopter and, looking back, could see just as many streams behind them. Meanwhile forward gunner ADJ2 George L. Armstrong clung to his gun in the personnel door just behind the copilot in the left cockpit seat.

He poured 100% tracer rounds at the biggest muzzle flashes on the ground below them. Having practiced trying to hit targets from 3000 feet with their M-60s with poor results, Armstrong and Conrad had built up boxes of all-tracer in hopes the volume of visible fire would deter the enemy gunners. It seemed to work when a site was targeted, but there were too many of the guns to effectively suppress them all. While the tracers helped them bring rounds to bear on the guns below, tracers work both ways and their near-continuous fire provided the only reference to the actual location of the helicopter to the gunners trying to hit it in the pitch black night, attracting fire.

Down below in Mayfield's hedgerow hideout, from the instant he saw the helicopter come into view, his heart sank. Ground fire erupted from all around him and he realized he was completely encircled by the enemy. He later said he wouldn't have blamed the helicopter crew if they had made a 180-degree turn and gone back home.

In the vortex of the hostile fire, Clarke asked for another short count and realized they had flown past Mayfield, and he made the 180-degree turn Mayfield mentioned, but did not go back home. Passing back over the area, Jerry Smith saw one white light which was not winking and pointed it out to Clarke.

"Stiletto One, do you have a flashlight on?"

"Yes"

"Turn it off"

The light went out and Clarke decelerated quickly making a hard turn to keep the spot in sight. Jimmy Conrad concentrated his 100% tracers against a gun position 100-200 yards away on a small hill, firing over Mayfield's estimated position as the helicopter descended to a landing. Clarke cautioned him about the close proximity of Mayfield's location. The helicopter clattered to a rough landing about 30 feet from the hedgerow Mayfield was in. The hostile AA gun on the hill behind the hedgerow could not depress its barrel enough to hit the helicopter on the ground, but the helicopter could not hit the gun either. The gun was so close the spinning main rotors were in the M-60 line of fire.

As the Big Mother touched down, in his rear view external side mirror, Ron Clarke saw a shadowy figure running toward the helicopter from the right. He wasn't

certain if it was the downed Air Force pilot or a VC. At the same time, George Armstrong, manning the machine gun in the forward left personnel door, shouted:

“Here they come... let’s get out of here.”

He opened fire with his M-60. The crew of a second AA gun on a hill to the left of the Big Mother had run over edge of the hill and down the slope toward the helicopter. They were surprised by the fusillade of tracers from Armstrong’s gun, which dampened their ardor to assault the rescue bird.

“Full power,” Clarke shouted to Smith, who shoved the two engine throttles to the stops. Clarke eased up on the collective pitch lever and the helicopter began to get light on the wheels.

Back aft, Conrad identified the running man as friendly and watched him dive past him head first, sliding across the cabin deck on thousands of empty 7.62mm shell casings like the floor was covered with ball bearings. He fetched up under the troop seat along the port bulkhead as the helicopter nosed down and began to climb out, grabbing the bench leg to stop him slipping down the tilted deck.

As the helicopter accelerated and then climbed for the safety of darkness at 3000 feet, both gunners changed out their ruined machine gun barrels before they resumed defensive fire. AA fire returned to its full intensity and followed the Big Mother all the way back to the beach. As the helicopter crossed the beach, it was just starting to get light out. As the adrenalin-charged helicopter crew began to realize that they were safe and had somehow escaped death or worse, Mayfield asked when they were going to go back over the beach. Clarke informed Mayfield that under no circumstances would he be going back over the beach: that they were going to drop him off on a ship first. Ship? This was Mayfield’s first inkling he was in a Navy helicopter. He later told the crew he didn’t know the Navy was doing combat rescue. Before that plan of action could begin, Big Mother 70 was directed to return to *Ranger*; the rescue of the backseater had been assigned another helicopter.

As they began the hour-long trip out to *Ranger*, they heard an Air Force Jolly Green check in that he was inbound. Clarke advised him to wait for RESCAP support and ground fire suppression fast movers before he ventured inland now that it was daylight. Soon after, they monitored the Jolly calling “feet dry” followed shortly by:

“We have been hit and are getting the hell outta here.” Further comms indicated they had had the nose of the helo “blown off.”

Back aboard *Ranger*, a large contingent of news media personnel gathered for the landing. They had come aboard the day before, had heard all the radio communications of the entire rescue, the ship having piped all the chatter over the 1-MC, the general announcing system. It was reported this was the first time the press had been allowed aboard ship on Yankee Station, so the whole thing was a big event for them. It was a bigger event for Captain Marvin Mayfield and the crew of Big Mother 70. And all concerned were interviewed and made the national T.V. news for the rescue.

The Marines stepped up after the damaged Jolly withdrew, and successfully retrieved the Mayfield’s WSO, Air Force First Lieutenant R.D. Clark, later in the afternoon, much to the relief of Mayfield.