

Leave No Man Behind

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Part IV-9 Indian Summer Navy Late '66

Commander Vermilya and his normal enlisted crewmen, AXC Tom Grisham, and ADJ2 Jerry Dunford, and with his regular copilot, Ensign Bill Runyon, were flying the CSAR duty at North SAR (on) August 31st 1966, and had just completed their second refueling of the flight, about eight hours into their day, when they heard the voice of a very concerned Crusader pilot reporting the downing of his photo recce charge that had just been shot down over Haiphong. The RF-8G, flown by Lieutenant Commander Tom Tucker, had tried to stack the deck as much in his favor as he could for his recce pass over Haiphong harbor, given that his mission was to fly directly over one of the most heavily defended places in North Vietnam in broad daylight, at photo-taking altitude, way too low for comfort, by himself, with no one else to divide the concentration of the gunners, and takes pictures of the shipping in the harbor. He set up for a high speed run from shore to sea over the port so that, if damaged, he would already be headed out to sea and relative safety. Unfortunately for his prudent plan, the guns got to him a little too early for that plan to work as originally intended. He got feet wet, but in the secondary shipping channel of Haiphong between the mainland and Dao Dinh Vu, not the open ocean beyond the range of the batteries lining the coast.

Tucker had run into the gantlet from the beginning. Cannon to the right of him, cannon to the left of him, volleyed and thundered. Into the harbor of Haiphong rode the 600-knot Lieutenant Commander. His not to reason why... Seeing the black puffs of the heavy 85mm AA guns, mixed with the gray puffs of the medium 37mm AA guns, and the necklaces of green basketballs from a bunch of 12.7mm AA machine guns for good measure, he could only jink and weave and hope for the best. The 37mm got him good and he lost control of his aircraft, ejecting at 1500 feet. Floating down under a good canopy, Tucker was fired upon by AA guns and small arms. He splashed down not far from a Russian ship tied up at the quay wall. The Russian crew got busy with a lifeboat. Sampans and sailboats put out from the shore, and men along the banks kept him under small arms fire. The lone Crusader up above, flown by Lieutenant Commander Foster "Tooter" Teague, saw the boats coming out and roared down in a strafing which sent them scuttling back to shore where they beached themselves.

Teague was switching channels spreading the word and coordinating getting them help. Every time he changed off Tucker's survival radio frequency, Tom has a moment of panic until he checked back in. Vermilya knew that Harbor Master, the shipboard SAR commander in the Gulf of Tonkin, needed to grant him permission to attempt the rescue has been easing toward the harbor, betting on the come, expecting to get that permission shortly. He notified Teague that he was waiting for that permission and for

RESCAP. Tooter Teague replied plainly that if they don't come immediately, they need not bother coming at all. Vermilya, with Ensign William Runyon, his copilot, and Chief Tom Grisham, with ADJ2 Jerry Dunford, his junior crewman, pushed the nose over and began to speed toward the harbor at 3000 feet, theoretically above the effective AA gun altitude, and below the minimum SA-2 altitude.

As they entered the outer mouth of the harbor, six miles from the entrance of the secondary shipping channel, two SAMs exploded right above them, and Vermilya dove for the deck. So much for the briefed minimum SAM altitude; that was too close. They dropped to the deck, streaking across the water at two or three feet as fast as the big helicopter could go. Teague swung around behind them and began making passes first at junks along Big Mother's path, and then at the AA guns along the banks of the harbor.

Back in the channel, Tucker noticed that the guns have stopped firing near him; there was no Crusader above him any more, so he scrambled into his one-man raft, and started paddling away from the ships and shore. He noticed a division of A-1 Skyraiders pass overhead, followed a short while later by a division of A-4s, but the nearby guns were still holding their fire for some reason. Then Tucker heard an approaching storm of gunnery, closing in.

Amid shell splashes, tracer fire, and harbor smoke, Big Mother threaded her way through the shipping in the harbor, weaving right and left while keeping so low that Vermilya thought some of the guns checked fire for fear of hitting the shipping on both sides of the helicopter. After all, most of the larger shipping was not North Vietnamese, but was neutral. As Big Mother neared the entrance to the shipping channel after crossing six miles of outer harbor under fire, the two divisions of attack aircraft begin to strafe the guns along the banks of the shipping channel, and the SA-2 missile batteries in the area commenced firing. They were after the attack planes overhead, which dodged them, but keep their attacks focused on the guns that would be waiting for Big Mother.

Concentrating on dodging the splashes and the ships, and the junks, Big Mother passed right by Tucker, whose red smoke flare was somehow missed in all the agitation. Chief Grisham, on the starboard gun in the cargo door, saw him behind them after they had passed and called out the sighting. He also noticed sampans closing in on Tucker. Grisham and Dunford engaged them with their M-60 machine guns, avoiding shooting their own rotors as Vermilya reefed the Big Mother around in a tight high angle of bank turn, rolling right into an extreme nose-up flare to a quick stop rocking over into a hover right above the raft. Tucker got into the sling correctly on the first try and in record time, and Vermilya nosed over, hardly having been steady in a hover more than a few seconds, and not waiting for Tucker to be hoisted into the cabin. The helicopter turned and began the gantlet back down the shipping channel and across the open harbor toward the open sea, reeling in Tom Tucker as they went. As soon as Tucker was in the cabin, he admonished the crewmen for not firing their guns. He immediately moved to the cabin gun, and fed the belt while Grisham began to put out defensive fire. Tucker was furious that he had been shot at while in his chute, and yelled to Grisham that he wanted to stay and fight.

Big Mother cleared the harbor and the RESCAP broke off, and then the shooting stopped. A check of the aircraft revealed that they had not taken a single hit. No one can believe it, not least the wet fighter pilot who had been unable to avoid hits at four times the speed of the lumbering, to him, helicopter. From the first round directed at them

inbound, to the last round thrown at them in parting, Vermilya, Runyon, Grisham, and Dunford had been under continuous fire for 20 minutes. Tucker was hoisted down to USS *Towers*, as the ship had closed the fight to just outside coastal gun range in support, and now received Tom Tucker from Big Mother, which returned to an orbit around *Towers*, awaiting another rescue call, her duty on station period for the day not yet over.

This had been one of the most daring and dangerous rescue missions of the war, and it had been caught on film. Photographers Mate Second Class Mike Delamore, had hopped the flight in hopes of getting some footage of the daily business on Yankee Station. He got more than he bargained for and was as busy shooting film as Tom Grisham and Jerry Dunford were shooting 7.62 ammunition