

Leave No Man Behind

George Galdorisi & Thomas Phillips

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Part IV-9 Indian Summer Navy Late '66

(... on 12 October 1966 a)n A-1H from VA-25 was hit by AAA as it flew along a highway and made for the sea. Fire in the wing became unmanageable and Lieutenant Robert Woods bailed out before the plane could reach the sea. Arriving in the area quickly, (Lt Bob) Burnand's copilot, Lieutenant Junior Grade Doug Heggie, established radio contact with Woods but could not spot him. Neither could Woods see Burnand's helicopter. They worked for an hour and a half trying to come together, with Big Mother enduring ground fire several times as the localization continued. Woods coached them in by their sound, having to compete on the radio with needless radio chatter from other searchers trying to help out.

Forced to hover to see under dense foliage as they got closer and closer to Woods, they were taken under automatic weapons fire from point blank range, riddling the helicopter and wounding crewman AX1 Kenneth W. White. Ken White remained at his gun station adding his volume of his return fire to that of AX3 Rodger Sitko to suppress the ambush, allowing Burnand to break away and then escape the exposed hover. Their suppressive fire probably saved the fixated helicopter from being shot down on the spot.

Despite his wound, White encouraged Burnand to keep searching, knowing they were close, that he was in danger of being captured, and convinced that the rescue was still feasible. They had seen the pen flare Woods fired through the jungle canopy just as the hostile militia opened up on them. But the process of localizing him had to start again because Woods had been forced to run for it after giving his position away with the pen flare. Big Mother was feeling the strain of all the hovering and its main transmission high temperature caution light illuminated, and the temperature gauge confirmed the high temperature. Burnand, low on fuel, and losing daylight, faced with the transmission emergency situation, and with a wounded crewman on board, reluctantly withdrew.

Next morning, Bob Burnand, with a different crew, copilot Lieutenant Junior Grade Ross Mordhorst and petty officers AX3 Roy W. Powell and AMH2 Royce L. Roberts, return to the area to resume the search with no success. They returned the following day, alternating with Lieutenant Commander David Murphy's crew, again with no luck finding Woods, who was no longer on the radio.

While hope was waning that they could rescue Lieutenant Robert Woods, a new command involved with combat rescue got into the act. The Joint Personnel Recovery Center, mounted one of its first rescue efforts. A ground rescue team, made up of two U.S. Special Forces NCOs and twelve Nung Chinese mercenary commandos, with the code name Shining Brass, was flown out to *Intrepid*, and after a day of delay waiting for

National Command Authority permission to go into North Vietnam, the Shining Brass team was inserted into the search area on the morning of October 16, 1966. The men were hoisted down by two HS-6 helicopters about 800 yards from the last best guess of Woods' position. The team had been on the ground only about a half an hour when they encountered a North Vietnamese patrol they could not avoid. The Nungs opened fire when the patrol approached within ten meters of the Shining Brass team. All four North Vietnamese were killed without Nung casualties, but the North Vietnamese troops in the area were alerted, the mission was compromised, and the team leader called for extraction.

Dave Murphy's crew in one HS-6 bird, and Bob Burnand's in the other, returned quickly and began to hoist the men back aboard. In the middle of this process, with three Nungs aboard, Murphy's helicopter came under fire, intense and accurate fire, with numerous rounds audibly smacking the helicopter. Murphy's copilot, Ensign Ed Marsyla suddenly noticed the strong odor of fuel and called a warning to Murphy. Faced with the complications accompanying a serious fuel leak, including an engine failure, Murphy immediately decided to break the hover, dumping the nose of the SH-3A over, using all his skill to quickly wrestle the helicopter into forward flight. Ten seconds after Marsyla smelled the fuel, an engine began to back off, losing power steadily and quickly flaming out, starved of fuel by a serious nick of a fuel supply line. His decisive reaction got them enough airspeed to keep flying as the engine fell off the line. Marsyla's uncommanded selection of maximum power on the remaining engine, was a second vital action which allowed this escape maneuver. Meanwhile Murphy's crewmen, ADJ1 Vince Vicari and AX3 William L. Caple, sprayed machine gun fire at the enemy from both door positions, forcing them to take cover and providing the momentary respite from their gunfire to allow the escape.

Burnand, realizing that Murphy was unable to continue to hoist the men, steadfastly held his hover and worked the hoist from the cockpit while both his gunners, AX3 Roy Powell and AMH2 Royce Roberts provided supporting fire to the dwindling circle of surrounded mercenaries as they were hoisted aboard one by one. With the last man aboard, they cleared the area and followed Murphy toward the sea, seven miles away.

Murphy successfully cleared the area and climbed as quickly as the remaining engine would allow for the overcast leveling off in the safety of the clouds at 3000 feet. As the four Navy men and three Nungs approached the heavily guarded coastline, whose garrisons were alerted to the presence of the Navy helicopters, the overcast ended and they burst into clear air right over the beach area. Marsyla was looking down at a quaint white schoolhouse with a red roof when the helicopter was buffeted by three explosions close aboard in quick succession.

"Descend! Descend! Descend!" shouted Vicari as he looked out the cargo door at 37mm and 57mm AAA shellburst right at their altitude. A round exploded right against the tail cone and the concussion injured all three Nungs, their eyes, ears, and noses bleeding from the overpressure. Marsyla smelled the overwhelming stink of cordite forward in the cockpit. The helicopter fell away as Murphy entered an autorotation to rapidly change altitude. Succeeding bursts bloomed at the 3000-foot altitude as the helicopter descended out over the ocean; Vicari's descent call and Murphy's instant reaction had saved them.

The shrapnel from the exploding rounds had wounded every man aboard and Caple was down bleeding profusely from a face wound across the bridge of his nose. Murphy had little choice but to press on and nursed his battered helicopter out to sea. When Vicari revived the unconscious Caple and stopped his bleeding, he inspected the helicopter for damage. He identified damage to one of the tail rotor control cables in the tail cone, which was partially severed, and was popping strands one by one. Unable to repair the cable, he snapped some photos, which later enabled them to count 252 shrapnel or gunfire holes in the helicopter.) Marsyla smelled fuel again, and looked down at the fuel gauges. The aft tank quantity needle was visibly moving down toward zero: the self-sealing tank had been unable to stem the fuel any longer.

Murphy headed for the destroyer at South SAR about fifteen miles out to sea, but they didn't make it. The tail rotor control cable finally parted as they were making their final approach to the flight deck of the destroyer. Murphy and Marsyla fought the helicopter as it began to spin. Murphy lowered the collective control to reduce torque on the main rotors, which would reduce the spinning, while Marsyla pulled off the power to the one remaining engine to reduce torque drive to the rotors, and down they went, headed irretrievably to the water. Murphy ditched the helicopter neatly, keeping it from rolling over by excellent airmanship, facilitated by hours of practice for this extreme emergency situation, and a measure of great good luck. Had the helicopter rolled over, no doubt some of the wounded passengers and crewmen would have been caught in the cabin and drowned. Vicari and Caple calmly followed their training to clear the wounded passengers from the cabin. They deployed the seven-man life raft, which only partially inflated, having been riddled by shrapnel. The men huddled in the semi-submerged blob as the choppy seas carried it under the tail cone, which rose up on a wave, and fell down on the side of the raft, capsizing it. They treaded water only a few moments before the ship's motor whaleboat hove up and rescued them. The normally amphibious helicopter swamped, its boat hull sieved by numerous shrapnel holes, including three in the tail cone which were big enough to thrust a fist through. It went to the bottom of the Tonkin Gulf, the only combat loss suffered by HS-6 on this cruise.