

Sea Battle Rages During Rescue of Pilot

SAIGON (UPI) — A downed American pilot was rescued off the North Vietnamese coast while two destroyers covered him in a blazing gun duel with Communist shore batteries.

The U.S. Navy pilot, who was not identified, was shot down just east of the North Vietnamese city of Vinh on Thursday.

Earlier, the Australian guided

missile destroyer Perth and the U.S. destroyer Bordelon were firing on North Vietnamese supply routes when the gun batteries opened fire on them.

The first rounds landed between the two ships. Although one round came about 100 yards from the Bordelon, neither ship was hit. Both ships, including the Perth's rapid firing five-inch guns, returned the fire.

U.S. Navy carrier-based A4 Skyhawks, responding to the

Perth's call, were sent to the scene to strike the North Vietnamese guns. In the Perth's combat information center, Lt. Cmdr. Geoff Cockram of Sydney, Australia, and Leading Seaman Daryl Dunlop of Deahella, Western Australia, directed the strike.

One of the Skyhawks was hit by ground fire. The pilot ejected and parachuted into the Gulf of Tonkin about 11 miles from the positions of the destroyers.

The aircraft was the 793rd American aircraft shot down over North Vietnam thus far in the war.

The destroyers raced toward the downed pilot and continued bombarding the shore batteries to protect the man who was only five miles off the coast.

A rescue helicopter hauled the pilot to safety while the Perth and the Bordelon continued patrolling the waters off North Vietnam.