

'I Clung to the Sling... Waiting for a Bullet'

SAIGON (UPI)—Navy pilot Dennis A. Lawrence didn't give himself a snowball's chance in the summer sun of being pulled out of the wilds of North Vietnam alive.

His crippled A4 Skyhawk in a nose-dive, Lawrence bailed out into a beehive of Communists in the rugged mountains of the southern panhandle and for 32 agonizing minutes waited for them to come for him.

Instead, a Navy rescue chopper showed up.

It happened Friday. The Navy released Lawrence's own account Sunday:

"I was doing somersaults in the air and then I felt . . . a jolt when the chute opened. As I came through the trees, my chute caught on one and swung me

against it. I was left hanging about five feet from the ground.

"I released myself and fell and slid down a mud slide. . . . I started up the hill and then I heard someone chopping. I went a little further . . . and saw a Vietnamese about 100 yards away. . . .

"All I had was my little survival knife. He was on top of the hill and I could only make him out every so often through the woods. . . .

"There were vines about knee high all over the ground, and I kept getting caught up in them. I didn't think I had a chance because I couldn't see an area where the helo could come and pick me up. . . . I gave myself about a 5 per cent chance of being picked up.

"All of a sudden I saw the sun coming through the trees. . . . when I got to the area, I just sat down. I put my feet out, put my back against a tree and took out my radio. I could hear the Vietnamese getting closer.

"I could hear them hacking through the jungle; they didn't talk, they just hacked through the jungle. About two minutes later, I heard the helo. . . . I yelled over the radio 'Hey, you got me—you're right over me.' Then I heard firing from the top of the hill. They were firing at the helo. . . .

"I could hear the North Vietnamese start yelling. I asked the helo pilot if he had me in sight and I saw him nod his head and I said 'open up the machine

guns and spray the area.'

"Empty shell casings began to fall all around me. They lowered the sling and it kept getting caught in the trees. . . . I finally got hooked up. . . . I told him to pull me up but he didn't. I was pressing the receive button and he couldn't hear me. It must have been a minute or so before I realized what I was doing. . . .

"Guns were going off everywhere and I just clung to the sling, waiting for a bullet to come plowing through me."

None did. The chopper, a Navy SH3 "Big Mother," made a fast getaway to a U.S. destroyer offshore. From there, Lawrence, 25, of Clifton, N.J. was taken back to his carrier off the coast of North Vietnam, none the worse for wear.