

Leave No Man Behind

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Part IV-9 Indian Summer Navy Late '66

Five days after a “routine” unopposed rescue, on July 12, 1966, it was a little different. VF-162 Crusader pilot, Lieutenant Junior Grade Rick “Bulb” Adams and his mates were taunting the MiG pilots at Kep airfield by taking turns doing touch and go’s on the airfield runway, trying to get the MiGs to take off and fight. The MiGs did not take the challenge, but the indignant airfield defenders bagged Adams who was forced to eject right off the end of the runway into dense jungle-covered low hills. He was 70 miles inland, and about 30 miles northeast of Hanoi itself. All available Navy aircraft quickly diverted to the scene in a silent mutual understanding that one with such chutzpah needed saving.

The HS-6 Big Mother orbiting North SAR, flown by Lieutenant Bill Waechter and Lieutenant Junior Grade Bob Wildman, was cleared to attempt a rescue; a bold decision so close to Hanoi and a major MiG base. Picked up by four VA-152 A-1s, callsign Locket, the Big Mother coasted in northeast of Haiphong, passing over the islands at 2,500 feet, high enough to avoid accurate small arms, but they were immediately taken under heavy fire from a variety of large caliber AA guns. Ugly black clouds of 100mm flak quickly began to burst at the helicopter’s altitude and walk toward them, then stopped getting closer, and then moved away. (post-mission debrief credited effective electronic warfare aircraft with confusing the radar-controlled guns.) The fire followed them inland, and Waechter gave ADJ2 Harley Olsen and AX3 Michael Brantley permission to fire back at any enemy they could see. Both cheerfully began to return fire toward every source of tracers they could see near their flight path. At one point, Waechter zigged right toward an AA gun. Olsen, spotting the gun pit, dispersed the gunners with a well-placed stream of fire, just as they inadvertently flew over it, the big helicopter disappearing from the gunners’ view before they could re-man the gun.

Locket leader, Lieutenant Commander Eric Schade, broadcast:

“They’re hosing the helo.”

“Great,” thought Wildman.

Finally, the four Lockets escorting Big Mother, led her to the vicinity of the downed pilot, in the densely forested area. Not far away, jets swirled around the airfield attacking anything that moved, and pulling hostile fire from the low-level helicopter. Even though Wildman achieved voice communications with the downed Adams, the Big Mother crew could not spot him, and he could not see them. Luckily, someone sighted a parachute in the canopy tops down in a forested gorge, and from that clue, they caught a glimpse of Adams through the trees. Having only 100 feet of cable on the Navy hoist, Waechter and Wildman had to make a near vertical descent into the close confines of the

gorge to enable the hook to reach the ground. With Brantley and Olsen clearing the tail rotor and rotor blade tips from the surrounding treetops, Waechter eased carefully down into the gorge.

The surrounding heights cut off all wind, and the heat of the July day compounded the weight of the armored helicopter to require more power than the engines could deliver. When Waechter applied up collective to increase rotor blade pitch and arrest the descent, the engines went to full power trying to keep the rotor rpm at the desired 100%. Full power on both engines still could not do it, and the rotor rpm began to droop as Waechter continued to raise the collective lever to keep altitude. He had no choice if he wanted to avoid settling disastrously into the trees for lack of lift. As the main rotors slowed, the tail rotor likewise began to lose rpm, being mechanically connected to the main rotors through the transmission. As the tail rotor rpm slowed, there was no longer enough tail rotor power to hold the helicopter's desired heading. Slowly, the nose began to rotate to the right. Waechter had the left tail rotor control pedal shoved all the way forward to stop the rightward rotation of the nose to no avail.

Olsen, noting the right turn as he lowered the jungle penetrator through the trees to Adams, called for the pilot to stop the turn.

"Can't," came the terse reply.

Around they went, slowly turning 180 degrees in about one minute. Olsen went back to concentrating on getting Bulb Adams on the hoist and bringing him up without getting entangled in the trees.

With Adams on the way up, Waechter eased off his extreme left rudder, and rocked slightly right, dipping the nose ever so slightly. The combination of control inputs accelerated the slow turn, which eased the power demand on the tail rotor, and made an ever so slight amount of power from the tail rotor available for the main rotors, allowing the helicopter to begin to climb. Gingerly lifting vertically while spinning to the right, the Big Mother rose out of the claustrophobic confines of the gorge, drooping rotor rpm to the lower limit of controllability as they elevated. Once clear of the hole, they nosed over and picked up ground speed as they turned, providing a bit more rpm for the main rotors. Finally away from the gorge, the rotor rpm rose back to normal as the speed increased. They had pulled off the near-impossible pickup by unparalleled airmanship; the most exquisite of subtle control movements. The Navy men cleared the gorge and headed for the safety of the sea. As they came out of the mountain area, the enemy AAA picked up where it had left off and threw up repeated salvos all the way back to the coast. The Big Mother accelerated beyond 100 knots, impatient to escape with their prize, and the airframe began to vibrate and shake like a hound dog passing a peach pit; a side effect of the added armor location and weight known to the helicopter crewmen, but not to Bulb Adams, Crusader pilot. Home the crusader came from the hill and the sailors home to the sea.