

Curtis H. Briggs

QB 36465 (TRI)

On Oct. 15, 1991, a reunion took place near Rogersville, Tennessee. Although it was a happy occasion for the two men who had not seen each other in 26 years, their acquaintance stemmed from events neither would have wished to have reason to recollect. In fact, they were fortunate to have survived the circumstances which brought them together for just minutes on a remote mountain top in Laos, Southeast Asia in 1965.

In 1991 Richard "Dick" Casterlin was a helicopter pilot for Southern Natural Gas. He was also working on a book in his spare time about Air America. He previously worked for Air America as a helicopter pilot during the Vietnam conflict. Air America was also the subject of a motion picture, which Casterlin says is not an accurate depiction of the airline.

Through mutual friends Briggs had been able to track down Casterlin, and called and talked to him for the first time in over 25 years.

Briggs says "In 1976 I was First Officer on a Boeing 727 trip with National Airlines, the Captain, Red Austin, who flew for Air America during one of National's furloughs, was telling this story about a hairy rescue a friend of his did in 1965 where he plucked a downed pilot out of North Vietnam while flying for Air America in S.E. Asia. "It sounded very familiar" says Briggs....."I was the pluckee".



Curt Briggs & Dick Casterlin

Casterlin's visit was part of his research for the book, information about a two day period, 26 years ago. When Briggs was an Air Force pilot in the Vietnam War, He was flying an F4 Phantom, jet out of Ubon, Thailand, making bombing runs into North Vietnam and then providing fighter protection for the larger Republic F105 Thunder chief (Strike CAP). On

June 20, 1965, he and the other pilot, Paul Kari were making a bombing run over Son La, North Vietnam, about 50 miles South of China and 90 miles, Northwest of Hanoi. His group was not expecting much enemy anti-aircraft fire, but it came. At 10:30 AM Briggs' F4 was hit by .37 mm radar tracking gun from the ground. "As we were jinking, (rolls and turns) to make your plane a poor target, we could feel the plane being hit. They were locked onto us and just kept hitting us. The plane was one big ball of fire!" Briggs said. "The cockpit was full of heavy dense smoke and we blew the canopies off so that we could breathe. Less than a minute later, we lost all hydraulic pressure and the hydraulic flight controls went out and we couldn't control. the airplane ... and at the time we blew the canopies there was fire coming out of the left engine intake duct and we had lost intercom and radios. Sheets of flame were coming up over the cockpit area, and I ejected as the Phantom started an uncontrollable roll to the left."

Briggs said when he pulled the handle to eject his seat, the g-force (gravitational force) was enough that he blacked out. He said he came to within a few seconds when the parachute opened. "It was really amazing to go from all that noise and smoke in the cockpit at once to the quietness of being in the parachute. It was the first time I had ever parachuted out of an airplane. I couldn't believe how quiet it was. You could hear the wind blowing through the parachute shroud lines. It was just very peaceful, but the reality of where I was struck me, and from then on it wasn't very pleasant."

Briggs said he could see the plane, a ball of fire, below. A quarter of a mile away he could see two more parachutes. One was Kari.

The other he surmised to be a drag chute which had burned free from the fuselage of the plane.

"After my parachute opened I went into a cloud, and when I came of the cloud I saw something go floating past me. I looked up and it was my life raft." He explained that the pilot seats contain survival kits in a fiber glass box that eject with the pilots. After the parachute opens a lever is to be pulled to separate the kit from the harness. The kit remains attached to the parachute by a 20-foot lanyard, and a life raft that automatically inflates. Briggs said the kit had malfunctioned and the raft had come out and inflated while still attached to his harness. "The raft, while I was in the cloud, was circling my body. Then I noticed that my parachute was oscillating wildly ... And my body was kind of following the raft as the raft was circling me, and I looked down, and with the lanyard, I was starting to get wrapped up like a mummy. I was fairly low to the ground and all I had time to do was get untangled from the lanyard, unbuckle the kit from my parachute, and I had one attempt to stop the oscillations.

The parachute would swing left to right, and I hit the ground on a downswing, going backwards. I hit so hard, I was lying there thinking, 'My God, I've broken my back'... I later found I had crushed a vertebra." Briggs didn't have time to worry about, that. He quickly hid his parachute under some bushes, pulled out a hunting knife, which was attached to his boot, and sliced open the raft to deflate and hide it; took out the survival kit, a canvas sack with rations, water, flares and a mirror and headed for the cover.

"I landed in a valley, said Briggs. "There was high grass and bushes, it not unlike Tennessee, not jungle as in South Vietnam. One of the things they taught us in survival school was to head for the tree line. So at that point in time I was doing what I had been taught to do and I headed for this one ridge line to try and find a decent place to hide." He said he didn't see the other pilot land and was more concerned about protecting himself and finding a place to hide than trying to rendezvous with him. "I got into the base of the ridge line and found a rock shelf, and I hid at the bottom of it in some bushes." Briggs said that he cut all of his insignia from his flight suit, rank and name tag holder because it was a highly reflective plastic and could have been detected easily. "I was trying to rest and collect my thoughts, and going through my survival kit to see what I might have that I could use.

Then I started hearing voices. It sounded like there were groups of three men each ... walking right by my hiding place, but they were out of sight. After the third group went past, I remember, it was my first feeling of fright or terror ... and I thought ... 'If they're going to get me, why don't they get it over with.' It was just a fleeting thought. You hear the bad guys coming and they approach you and you're sitting there with a lot of anticipation ... Are they going to see you? Do they know you're there? ... And then they pass you by. Then here comes another group and you go through all that again."

In all there were six groups that passed by. Briggs said he could hear their conversation.

Then he didn't hear them anymore, but he could hear the rest of his flight. He could hear the moan of an F4, and figured they had also called in planes from other missions, for he heard an F105 fly right over his position. "And I heard anti-aircraft guns going off in the target area I had just come from. I couldn't believe how loud it was. It was like you felt the concussion of those big guns going off ... It was just unreal, the noise they were making. It was a loud boom, boom, boom! I was less than two miles from Son La and I could feel the concussion from the guns. Then I started to hear small arms fire from the soldiers down in the valley, firing at the planes overhead."

Briggs said he also heard the piston engine sound of a helicopter. He looked up and saw Casterlin at the far end of the valley, heading his way. Still he did not expect to see a rescue helicopter. He didn't know they were available that far North.

Casterlin explained that in 1965 the Air force did not have its own search and rescue operation. That would come about in later years. Briggs' F4 was the first Air Force F4C to be shot down in North Vietnam. Some Navy jets and F105s had been shot down previously, the first a year earlier, but his was the first F4. Briggs and Kari would have been POWs number 11 and 12 at the Hanoi Hilton, as it later turned out Paul Kari was number 11.

Air America was a privately owned airline operating in Laos, which was supposed to be a neutral country. However the communists were still operating there and Air America was helping to transport supplies to Mao (Hmong) tribesmen resisting the communist infiltration. Casterlin said at one time Air America was the third largest airline in the world, flying all over Southeast Asia. He said he later learned it was also a clandestine operation of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Air America had developed an agreement with the U.S. Air Force to fly search and rescue missions. Casterlin had been a Marine pilot, but he and all fellow employees of Air America were-civilian non-combatants. They were not allowed to carry guns, but never refused to go. Briggs pointed out that Air America crews were further disadvantaged by not having benefit of briefings on enemy locations and movements, as the fighter pilots had.

It was about 12:30 p.m. when Capt. Curtis Briggs saw the helicopter heading his way. He got out his reflective mirror to signal them. He lit a flare and threw it as far as he could into the grassy area.

Flares have a day end which sends up a lot of orange smoke to help pilots locate someone on the ground and to judge wind patterns. The other end emits a bright red glow for night detection. Briggs had mistakenly lit the night end. He said it was part of the training to throw the flare to help the rescue pilot, but in unfriendly territory it was probably a stupid thing to do. Nevertheless he wasn't spotted by anyone other than the rescue crew and they headed toward him. Casterlin said they had actually passed over him a couple of times, while trying to determine what enemy firepower they might be facing. He said he saw him very plainly, but Briggs could not recall hearing or seeing the helicopter until it headed toward him. Casterlin said that the signal mirror was blinding them in the cockpit. Briggs said he saw the hoist being lowered from the helicopter within 200 feet of him, and he was just standing up to run toward it when he heard the sound of machine gun fire from behind.

The North Vietnamese regular army had set up a machine gun, right behind Briggs' position. He

was below them, beneath a rock ledge. Bullets were ricocheting off the helicopter. Briggs could hear it sputtering. It pulled up and left the area. Casterlin said the controls were damaged and jammed by a bullet. He had to give it all the power he could, just to get away from there. "My feelings from the elation of seeing you (Casterlin) and then you pulled up and leaving me.... I remember thinking it's going to be a long time before I ever get out of this and get home ...I just can't describe the feeling of depression. I had my .38 pistol in my hand, and I thought, 'You miserable SOBs; I'm going to make you pay for that', and I started off after the machine gun nest. That's not like me at all. I had no fear. I was just going to make them pay for that. I was going to try to kill as many of them as I could."

Then Briggs said a more rational voice inside his head said 'Don't be stupid there's always tomorrow.'

"I just stopped and stood there and thought, 'Yeah, this is really stupid. A moment of insanity, when you're not afraid of dying anymore, you just don't. I mean I just can't describe the feeling of rage I had. Thank God I had that little voice that said 'Don't be stupid, there's always tomorrow!'"

"I jammed my pistol in the top of my G-suit. I got down in a crouch and started crawling away from where I was to find another place to hide. That's when I came upon that path. So I'm crawling along that path. The grass was only two or three feet high and there were some bushes, but not much cover."

Then the pistol fell out of his G suit and Briggs had to go back down the path about 20 feet to locate it, then he came to some bushes that were maybe four or five feet high and eight feet in diameter.

"As I backed into these bushes, I pushed the grass back so I wouldn't leave a trail. I was on my belly and crawled back into the bushes as far as I could, and lay there with my arms over the back of my head so they couldn't see the side of my face or back of my neck."

"There was an ant hill about ten inches from my face, big black ants about a half to three-quarters of an inch long. I remember lying there watching them. Their little trail was right by my face. All that day, they just kept going back and forth. ..But I didn't have any choice. That was the only place I could find to hide." Casterlin interjected that had they been red ants they probably would have gotten all over him, but fortunately they were the big black ants.

"The North Vietnamese troops were well organized. They were yelling commands and blowing whistles. I heard a lot of small arms fire as they were shooting at the planes overhead."

About an hour after Casterlin and his crew had left; he heard the low moaning noise of an enemy Mig 17 jet fighter. He would later learn that four Navy A-1 Skyraiders were involved in

the rescue effort, and one of them shot down one of those Migs that day. With a vertebra crushed when he had hit the ground, Briggs lay perfectly still.

It was mid afternoon. He could hear the soldiers all around him. Suddenly someone grabbed the bushes he was hiding in and screamed something in Vietnamese. "As a kid I spent a lot of time in the woods hunting. Sometimes if you got too close to a rabbit you almost have to kick him to get him to run. So I decided I wasn't going to move. If they wanted me they'd have to drag me out by the feet. I imagined they grabbed the bush and turned their face and screamed something, trying to scare me out, I just didn't move.... And it worked! They didn't know that I was there. They thought I might be in there but they didn't want to stick their face into the bushes and see. They didn't know where I was and they were just like four to six feet from me. I sounded like they were shouting in my ear."

"The military stopped searching at around 1700 hours and then the civilians came out, at least the sounds were different, and I could hear female voices. They did the same search and again shook the bushes that I was hiding in and again I didn't move. After darkness fell, the search stopped and later that night, I came out of hiding. I tried to move as quietly as I could but I felt like a Bull crashing around in a China shop. I was moving so slowly trying to be quiet that I was making little progress. I finally came upon a path and in the moonlight, I could see that it came from the direction of my original hiding place and now understood how they were able to set up the machinegun above where I was hiding until the helicopter brought into the open. I made use of the path to move in relative speed and quiet. The path came to a fork, I took the path to the right and in a while, I came to a small house with the front door so close to the path that you could knock on the door without moving off the path. I didn't like this situation so I backtracked and took the fork to the left and this time I came to another house but this one had a yard around it so I tried to work my way around the house staying on the outer edge of the yard or garden, I couldn't tell in the moonlight. Once in the back yard, I stopped and listened although the house was dark and quiet, I could hear faint swamp noise from the direction I was trying to move. Not wanting to deal with a swamp in the dark, I again back tracked on the path. The new plan was to move towards what I thought was East as I could see the North Star, Polaris. The other strange observation was the number of Fireflies or Lightening Bugs. More than I ever remember seeing in Northern Ohio when I was growing up. I got away from the vicinity of the houses and tried to work my way off the path towards the East where I knew the river was and a source of water. I was so thirsty that I was licking dew off plants and was on the verge of sucking up some muddy water in a few mud puddles. I had water in my survival kit but had abandoned it when I was running to the

helicopter. Actually I didn't know there was water there but was told later that that was one of the supplies in there. Later, briefing the troops on what to do if you get shot down, water was one of the major needs, that and a descent map. The silk map in the kit was of the whole world and the area I was in was of such a small scale, that it was totally useless. I used the map around my neck to keep the bugs out; I cut off my flying suit leg from the knee down and split the area between the zipper to pull over my head. I kept my G suit on all the time and still have it. The bugs sounded like they were going to eat me alive but I didn't get any bites".

It was about 2 a.m. "I couldn't see anything in the dark." Finally, I was just so tired, I said 'I'm just going to lie down and rest.' I was lying there, trying to take a nap, and in a few moments I heard voices. It was two men talking to each other as they walked by on the path. All this time of going in, backing out, moving to the left, trying again, backing out, moving left, trying again, Briggs said he never got more than 20 feet off the path.

It was daybreak when he heard an F-4 flying over the valley. He had earlier switched off his beacon to conserve power, and now switched it on again, but the F-4 left the area, so he turned it off again.

Then he noticed by getting down on his hands and knees, and keeping close to the ground he could move beneath the thickly interwoven branches. He could hear the North Vietnamese resume their search with the whistles and commands. Shortly he could hear the piston engine sound of two A-1E Skyraiders overhead.

.They split off, and I knew what they were doing. They went to the ADF mode and were homing in on my emergency locator. They did a 90-degree cross-hatch right over top of me. Then one of them broke off and made a low pass over the valley."

"He must have been only 200 to 300 feet in the air, and he went right past me in a shallow left bank, and I was looking right at him. I could see his face under his raised helmet visor ... I thought he spotted me." Still the two pilots gave no indication they'd seen him, so Briggs devised a new strategy, hoping the pilots could interpret his actions correctly. "When the nose of one plane was pointed directly at me, I switched the beacon off. Then I turned it on again for just two seconds when he was directly overhead. I waved a white handkerchief, risking detection by the soldiers. This time he dropped his landing gear and wagged the wings to signal he had seen me. I kept moving on the ground. I reached a clear area and lay down, surrounded by reeds four or five feet tall."

Then Briggs could see what appeared to be rifle barrel poking through the reeds. He was terrified at being caught by the enemy, so shortly after being spotted again by rescuers. It was only broken reed. "My imagination started playing tricks with me," he said. Then he saw

the helicopter coming for him. It was a different helicopter, but unknown to Briggs, piloted again by Casterlin. "I almost quit after that first attempt," said Casterlin, referring to the day before when he was forced to abandon the rescue because his helicopter was badly damaged by machinegun fire.

He was, after all, a civilian non-combatant hired to do a different job. He didn't have to be there. He wasn't even supposed to be there. Still, he came back. Briggs watched as the helicopter approached. This time it was his imagination. He saw the rope being lowered out of the aircraft:

"I dove right onto that 'horse collar" said Briggs. "I was just laying on it, expecting that they'd pull me up and in. Then Steve Nichols (a member of the rescue party) leaned out and yelled, "Are you going to get in this thing or not?" As soon as I was in, Nichols said; "Where's your buddy?" "I haven't seen him" I said. Then I immediately drank as much water as I possibly could. I had been on the ground without water for 26 hours, and my back hurt like hell!" Briggs was taken to Site 107, on a mountain top in Laos. It was the first rescue of a living pilot Casterlin had ever made.

It was the first Air America search and rescue mission into North Vietnam. It was the first rescue of any pilot downed inside North Vietnam. The F-4 pilot had picked up his beacon and the A1s were sent in to locate him, followed by, Air America.

Back on the ground, in friendly company, Briggs learned Casterlin's helicopter received so much damage the day before he considered sitting it down on a sand bar in the river.

The plan would have been to destroy the helicopter and climb aboard another. He was advised it would be too risky, they would be "sitting ducks" so with a bullet lodged in the controls, and Casterlin flew the helicopter back to their base. The second helicopter, which Briggs had not seen on that first day, had been badly hit, too. Col.Tong, a Laotian who was working with Air America to help combat the communists, was mortally wounded in the other rescue helicopter. He died a few days later.

"I looked at Casterlin's helicopter, (a Sikorski H19, with big Pratt 1340 radial in the nose, perfect for the mission) I couldn't believe the battle damage. I told Dick, you're crazy to do what you did. He replied "Actually, we're hard to hit." I can't remember how many holes were in it but the one that came through the cockpit and jammed the mixture into auto lean was close enough. I respect brave men; they think what they have to think so they can get up and face it every day. I had a premonition that I was going to get shot down (I couldn't get Paul to take our R&R, we were way over due, so I went by myself and we got it on my second mission back. The first mission was an RF101 escort over Son La and it was quiet, the next day they shot the hell out of us.)

On the mountain Briggs met Tomasan, a Mao (Hmong) tribesman, who asked to buy his .38 caliber pistol. Briggs explained he couldn't sell it because the gun belonged to the U.S. Air Force, but he gave him a handful of .38 tracer bullets. Tomasan invited Briggs to shoot a crossbow. It was a crude weapon made of bamboo and vine, and used for hunting small animals or birds. Briggs hit the bull's eye and was given the crossbow. "I still have it, but some visiting friends' kids broke it while I was away flying a trip". Tomasan took a picture of us (I don't remember who) and he was supposed to get it to me but it never came. Dick told me in 1991 that Tomasan's kid got his kite stuck in a tree and Tomasan fell getting it and died from the injuries.

During their recent reunion, as Briggs was showing the crossbow to him, Casterlin joked enviously, "Here I lived with those people for months and they never gave me one of those."

Back on the mountain in Laos, Briggs saw a slow-flying aircraft in a steep descent, pass overhead and disappear below the ridge. "I thought for sure it had crashed," he said. It was, in fact, descending to turn and make an approach to land uphill on a short runway on the side of the mountain top which was out of view. Then, I could hear it hanging on its prop and within moments it appeared up and over the edge of the mountain top. I had no idea that there was a dirt landing strip there on the side of the mountain. It was an Air America Helio Courier, a STOL aircraft, that came to transport Briggs back to the Air America base at Udorn, Thailand. "I'll never forget the pilot that climbed out of that Helio, he looked like Daddy Kool or someone out of Steve Canyon. Tall, well built, grey at the temples, ball cap, big pilot sunglasses and as I was to find out later, a hell of a good pilot. Tomasan and I jumped into the Helio and we rolled over the side of the mountain and took off. We made one stop at another dirt strip, on the way back to Udorn, to drop off Tomasan. When we landed at Udorn, I was met by two Air Force Colonels and taken to the Flight Surgeon for a checkup. I don't remember what the Doc said or did, I was only there a short time. Then the two Colonels took me to their house to get cleaned up and got me a uniform to wear. Then off to the Club for dinner". Later, that evening, at the Air America club, he met the Navy A1H pilot who spotted him on the ground, Lt. Commander E.A. Greathouse with the VA 25 squadron off the carrier Midway on battle station in the Gulf of Tonkin. .

From Udorn, he was flown to Saigon for a hospital examination and debriefing. Shortly after arriving in Saigon, I was ordered to report to "The General", I can't remember his name or how many stars. I reported as ordered, stating my name and he looked up and asked, "You fly an RF101?" I replied in the negative and then he said, "You're not the one I want to see". I found out later that he thought that I was Capt. Charles Shelton, an RF 101 pilot that was shot down over Laos and captured by the Pathet Lao

on 29 April, 1965. Shelton was being held for ransom by the Pathet Lao. My Air America rescue crew was in place waiting to pick up Capt. Shelton if a deal was made. I never would have been rescued if it hadn't been for that. Unfortunately they didn't make any deal, about which, I have no knowledge. Tragically Shelton died in captivity. Information in the book, Vietnam Fixed Wing Air Losses, page 19, says that Capt. Shelton made several escape attempts and in the process had killed at least three of his captors and after being held until around 1985 in Laos was eventually taken to North Vietnam. There were at least four rescue attempts to get him out of Laos and on one attempt he was freed only to be lost again to a NVA force. So many men can only walk in the shadow of a man like this.

Later, at the hospital, intelligence officers would dress me up in civilian clothes and sneak me out the back door and take me to a walled compound in Saigon where I would sit in front of a tape recorder all day and answer questions. Their explanation was that "You're the first one we ever got back."

Briggs was still not out of peril, he had another close call on his flight from Saigon returning to his base at Ubon, Thailand in a T39 Sabreliner. A Thai T33 pilot was denied permission to land behind the T39 and it appeared he tried to express his displeasure by attempting to do an aileron roll on his go around and hit the runway behind the landing T39. As Briggs's plane rolled out down the runway after landing, Briggs could see, out the cabin window, burning wreckage of the T33 slide past them on the runway.

Briggs was grounded for nine months with the back injury. Even if he was physically able to return to duty he would not be allowed to fly

again over enemy territory. From April to June, 1965, he flew 56 missions with the 45th Tactical Squadron, most of them over North Vietnam. Because he was on the ground for more than 24 hours, leaving behind identification, it would be easy for the North Vietnamese to identify him if he were shot down again; it would also exempt him from protection afforded to prisoners of war by the Geneva Convention. He could be executed as a spy.

Briggs was awarded a Purple Heart for injuries in combat and the Distinguished Flying Cross for bravery in facing intense anti-aircraft fire and for not exposing himself to the enemy during the initial rescue effort. He also received two air medals the fifty combat missions flown.

Briggs became a test pilot with the 15th Tactical Fighter Wing based at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL where he remained until leaving the USAF in 1967 and becoming a pilot for National Airlines.

He later learned Paul Kari, was not as fortunate. After they ejected, Kari was captured and spent almost 8 years as a POW. During that time he was hit in the head with a rifle butt, which ruptured an ear drum. He spent four years in solitary confinement. Due to a poor diet in solitary confinement, he developed Beriberi and all but his peripheral vision was lost. Col. Kari is retired from the Federal Aviation Administration. Paul now lives in Wilmington, OH. Paul and Curt went on a fishing trip to Canada about ten years ago and stay in contact.

In 1991 Casterlin was helicopter pilot with Southern Natural Gas in Metairie, La. and was working on a book about Air America, tentatively titled "The Night the Frog Swallowed the Moon". The book Air America by British author Christopher Robbins, which Casterlin says strayed from the facts, inspired

him to write his book. Casterlin said he has not seen the motion picture about Air America, and has no plans to see it. He said he heard from fellow members of an Air America organization that the movie is not very factual, and is more entertainment than historical. He added that to his knowledge he never carried any drugs while a pilot for Air America, as is depicted in the movie.

Briggs went on to become a commercial pilot for National Airlines, Pan American Airlines, and retired from Delta Airlines. Of his almost 30 year airline career all but 5 years were flown as Captain.

He and his wife, Michelene, enjoy their retirement on their 200 acre gentleman's farm near Rogersville, TN.



Curt Briggs 1967