

The Rescue of Whiskey 51 in Southern Laos gathered by Norman Malayney

This is the story of the rescue of John F. Clayton and Kenneth C. Simonin near Tchepone, Laos

On 28 February 1967, 558 TFS Whiskey (WH) a flight of four F-4Cs left Cam Ranh Bay for the Tiger Hound area in southern Laos: Major John F. Clayton/ 1st Lt. Kenneth C. Simonin serial #64-0764, Majors. Bill R. Forsman/James P. Gammon #64-0768), Captains Alexander Martin/? Davis #64-0805, and Captain Charles V. Luigs/? Johnson #64-0724.

After rendezvous, Hillsborough (ABCCC) diverted the flight from Ban Napo Truck Park location to work with FAC Covey 68 for a road cut, eleven miles east of Tchepone. WH51, 52 & 53 attacked while 54 held high with CBU and gun. WH 51 followed 53 for a second pass when enemy rounds struck 51, setting on fire the right engine which quickly spread to the left. Following him, WH 52 observed flames engulf the entire tail section and radioed, "Bailout...bailout...bailout." Both WH 51 crewmembers ejected almost immediately and two fully deployed parachutes were observed.

WH53 assumed command and directed 54 on high cap, 53 mid cap and 52 low cap. FAC notified Hillsborough and SAR of the downed aircraft, detected two beepers and observed two parachute shrouds in the tops of jungle trees. A second FAC joined the rescue effort and four 388 TFW "Falstaff" F-105s arrived for RESCAP as a Jolly Green (JG) helicopter headed inbound. WH 53 expended his ordnance on a road cut and joined the remaining flight for return to base.

John Clayton documented his recollections of the event: *I was recovering from a 45-degree dive-bomb pass at 5500 AGL when the aircraft received six to eight hits over a two-second period. I recovered from the dive until I had a 10-degree climb. My thoughts were to get as far away as possible from the target area. The right engine started losing power just after leveling off and the right engine fire warning light illuminated. After retarding the right throttle to idle, the left engine fire warning light lit. We were still too close to the target for a successful evasion attempt, so I immediately applied both throttles in full afterburner and jettisoned all external stores. My wingman called that I was on fire and to eject. About four miles south of the target the aircraft controls burned through and the nose started dropping. I ordered Simonin to eject and we both left the aircraft almost simultaneously using the alternate ejection handle. The aircraft flew at 5,000 feet AGL, 450 KCAS and in level flight when we punched out.*

The force of ejection was sharper than my two previous ejections (both F-100C). I remember drawing my legs back prior to pulling the handle. I did not have the helmet visor down. While the seat was still tilting forward and prior to drogue chute deployment, I lost my helmet in the slipstream, even though the chinstrap was fastened. The remainder of the ejection sequence was normal with a fully deployed parachute, slightly above the level of the abandoned aircraft. I could hear a great deal of ground fire coming from hills northeast of my position. I took out my survival radio and reported the ground fire location to my flight. I learned later they did not receive any of my transmissions.

During descent, I observed several farm plots with a few hootches, surrounded by jungle. I decided not to deploy the seat survival kit and to try for the jungle. My attempts to steer the parachute by the risers proved unsuccessful because of gusty wind conditions. I landed in the top of a very tall tree while descending sideways

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about the same speed. I managed to catch hold of the main tree trunk and absorbed the landing shock with my feet. After looking around, I realized I was in full view of some hootches and a well-traveled path. I could almost sense that people were watching which provided me an incentive and desire to move. After unfastening the chute risers and survival pack, I began climbing down the trunk. I could not see the ground and was still well over 100 feet high.

I 'bear hugged' the tree and started to shimmy downward. During descent the trunk circumference became larger and larger. After about 50 feet, it became so wide, I was no longer able to control my decent. As I went through the jungle canopy, I removed my legs from around the tree and let them hang down to absorb the landing shock. I could just barely grasp the trunk with my arms, then lost grip and plummeted the final 20 feet to the jungle floor and landed on my backside, suffering a fractured vertebra injury. I almost blacked out, but after a few moments regained my vision, caught my breath, and struggled to stand up.

I abandoned both the chute harness and water wings and painfully started towards the southeast which appeared from the treetop to have the thickest jungle. After traveling 60 feet or so, I came across several unfinished hootches which looked several weeks old. I soon realized they were located on an old trail, and the fear of meeting someone caused me to stop and look around for the best hiding place nearby. I scrambled on all fours through one of the dwellings and continued crawling, leaving as little trail as possible, until I was on a slight rise about 80 feet behind and out of sight of the hootches. My pistol continued snagging on vines, so I discarded the belt holster and placed the weapon in my chest pocket.

I lay as flat as possible in a small depression, removed my survival radio from underneath my G-suit and attempted to establish radio contact. Apparently the radio was damaged and required considerable tinkering with the battery and antenna-switch to get it to work. When it functioned, all I could receive was Simonin's radio beeper signal. The wind would alternately blow, making considerable rustling and whizzing sounds through branches and vegetation, then everything became deathly still. The radio made so much noise when it worked that I turned it off when the wind stopped and on again when the wind blew.

I remember looking at my wristwatch and estimated the ejection occurred between 1610 and 1615 hours. It was 1628 when I heard someone whistle to my left and behind me. Another whistle answered to my right and also behind me. I turned the radio off and hugged the ground hoping to remain hidden. I was afraid that looking around would reveal my position as most of the leaves had fallen, and I could see about 30 to 50 feet in any direction. Several minutes later I heard some voices talking excitedly about 150 feet in front of me near the tree I had landed in. I lay as motionless as possible for another fifteen minutes without hearing anything further except the wind gusts noisily rustling the brush.

I discovered that holding the palm of my hand over the radio speaker regulated the volume by the amount of pressure applied. Using this method I monitored the radio continuously and attempted to transmit only when the wind blew. Most of the transmissions receive were meaningless until I heard someone say the rescue choppers would arrive in 45 minutes to an hour. After being on the ground about thirty minutes I established radio contact with Simonin and instructed him not to beep anymore.

After one hour and twenty minutes from bailout, the rescue choppers finally arrived. I attempted to vector the JG to my position but he did not respond. Although he answered me, his transmission was unreadable. I popped a smoke flare and the JG slowly crept to a hover about 100 feet downwind where the smoke cleared the jungle canopy. When the erratic winds abated, I popped my second smoke flare and the JG moved to within 20 feet of

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my position. I learned later that, although I was holding the smoke flare and kept the hoist operator in view, he could not see me.

After a few moments, I noticed the jungle penetrator move farther away instead of closer. I gave chase through and around some brush for 15 or 20 feet until it came to rest near the center of a small bamboo thicket. I grabbed the sling, lowered two seats to sit on, tightly cinched the chest strap, and waited expectantly to be reeled upward. When nothing happened, I looked up and couldn't see the chopper. I tried to signal the hoist operator by shaking and jerking the cable to no avail, so I took out my radio again and attempted to make it work. When the hoist operator decided I had enough time, he started retrieving the jungle penetrator. I then realized the cable had wrapped itself around my left ankle and hoisted me upwards, upside down. Because of the thick bamboo and vines, I could not untangle my foot until about 10 or 15 feet above the ground. While traveling upside down, the chest strap carried my weight. Without it, I would have fallen off.

Once clear of the bamboo, I was able to right myself, but the flip-flop in position caused me to swing and the cable snagged briefly in the tree branches. I was able to work clear of the larger limbs with the hoist operator's help, but the cable became hopelessly tangled in smaller twisted branches near the treetop. I gave the operator a 'thumbs up', tucked in my head and grasped the cable above with both hands, and let him pull me free. I received numerous but superficial scratches and abrasions to my right hand, right cheek and neck. I had no difficulty getting into the chopper. The rest of the trip was uneventful with the JG delaying long enough to retrieve Simonin.

According to WSO Kenneth Simonin ...and we got hit on the second pass. We guess it was either .51cal. or 37mm rounds that struck our aircraft. It damaged the right engine which immediately caught fire. Clayton went to full afterburner to get us out of there. The fire spread quickly leaving both engines ablaze, and then we lost all hydraulics. Clayton made a decision and said, 'Let's go' and I was out of there. I ejected somewhere around 500 knots.

During descent I observed Clayton approximately a half to one mile away, but in another area. Crashing through the triple-canopy jungle top, I continued plunging downward until the larger branches snagged the collapsed nylon parachute and lines. I found myself hanging suspended from the risers with lines extending to the shroud caught in the upper leafy branches.

Fear does wondrous things to you--it makes you see things that are not there. I would estimate that in those days I dangled 100 to 150 feet above the jungle floor; a more reasonable assessment is between 75 to 125 feet. I wrestled with a thought of swinging side-to-side to grasp a main tree trunk, but this was out of the question. The trees were too far apart, and if the snagged shroud should unravel, it was a long distance down. I already suffered severe pain from a leg injury and feared further damage falling from this height.

The Martin-Baker seat has leg straps. When bailing out of a Fox 4, both lower extremities are automatically pulled back into the seat before ejection. It prevented your legs being damaging on the canopy frame during high-speed exit. During the ejection sequence, the strap yanked my left leg back causing a muscle injury that resulted in my limping for about a week.

The A-1E Skyraiders eventually arrived and performed their coverage, then disappeared. I never saw any further aircraft until a half-hour to three-quarters of an hour later, when the Jolly Green arrived. He flew past directly over me, so I got on my radio and said, 'Hey, you missed'. I guess he did not hear me and went to recover John Clayton who confronted a more dangerous situation.

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My current position proved precarious. I could see below through the tree branches and observed a footpath. In the distance, I heard dogs barking, so I was near a village of some sort. But no one travelled down that path for an hour and a quarter while I hung stranded high above.

Eventually, the rescue helicopter began searching for me. I am not sure if I fired off a penguin flare or not. Softly, I began talking by radio to the aircrew but they failed to determine my exact location. Soon they hovered about 50 yards away but detected nothing. So, I sort of vectored the pilot by an ILS ‘...come five degrees left... five degrees right,’ etc. The pilot approached to within 20 yards but still could not see me through the thick treetop foliage.

He finally hovered almost directly overhead before crewmembers spotted the parachute. They slowly lowered the jungle-penetrator bullet down through the branches. As it approached, I climbed aboard, released my parachute harness, and then fastened the penetrator’s safety strap around me. A crewmember then began to winch me upward. After about 15 feet of travel something began choking me—it was a shroud line caught around my neck. I motioned for them to stop, cut the line with a knife, and then hand-signaled to continue raising me back up again. When I finally climbed into the chopper, Clayton was already onboard with a severely injured back.

The Sikorsky HH-3E rescue helicopter received scattered small arms ground fire when entering and leaving the hostile recovery area. The 3d ARRG crew were Capt. Robert J. Svoboda, pilot; Capt. Richard A. Orsini, copilot; SSGT Robert S. Riley, flight engineer and A2C John Pighini, PJ specialist. [1] According to Pighini, the flight crew set first priority on recovering the injured pilot: *We got him on board and went after the backseat navigator who was hanging in a tree.*

From the side doorway, Pighini and Riley maintained lookout for collapsed branches and foliage forming a narrow opening that soon enabled Pighini to spot Simonin dangling deep beneath the dense jungle canopy: *I was going to go down and get him but he reported by radio that he was fine and could handle getting on the penetrator himself.*

After safe recovery, the helicopter transported both men to Ubon, Thailand, where an awaiting field ambulance whisked them away to a medical facility for flight surgeons to examine for injuries.

1. Robert L. LaPointe, PJs in Vietnam, Northern PJ Press, Anchorage, Alaska, 2001, page 426