

HC-7 RESCUE 97 ⁽¹⁾ 10-May-1972 (Wednesday)

HH-3A Sikorsky Seaking helo Det 110 Big Mother #62 149912

USS Okinawa (LPH-3) Combat Day ⁽²⁾

5.0 miles off North Vietnam coast

Water: 78° Air: 80° Wind: 15 knots Sea State: unknown

Pilot – LT Franklin A. Pinegar

Co-pilot - LT John P. Kennedy

1st crew – ADJ-2 Harold D. Freeman

2nd crew – ADRAN Elvin “Clay” Milledge

Alert received - 1410: UHF call on guard three erroneous of vectors from surface controllers

Vehicle departed – 1410: 35 miles

Arrived on scene – 1430 :

Located survivor - 1430: visual sighting of smoke

Begin retrieval - 1430: swimmer in water

Ended retrieval – 1433: rescue hook

Survivor disembarked – 1515: ambulatory USS Okinawa

F-4J Phantom 155800 NG-100 (Honey Bee 102 ⁽¹²⁾) (Showtime 100 ⁽⁶⁾) VF-96,
(Fighting Falcons) USN,
USS Constellation (CVA-64)

Ltjg William “Willie” P. Driscoll – RIO (ACE)

Seconds after Cdr Blackburn’s aircraft was shot down another of the Constellation’s Phantoms ran into trouble. Lt Cunningham and Lt Driscoll were in the flak suppression flight on the Hai Duong raid and had just released their cluster bombs when they were attacked by two Mig-17s. The MiGs overshot and Lt Cunningham fired a Sidewinder that destroyed one of the enemy aircraft. By this time there were several groups of MiG-17s, MiG-19s and MiG-21s in the air near Haiphong and it was obvious that the VPAF had launched an all-out effort against the raid. Lt Cunningham and his wingman dived into a group of eight MiGs that were attacking three other Phantoms of VF-96. With his second Sidewinder Cunningham shot down another MiG-17 that was on the trail of Cdr Dwight Timm’s Phantom. As four Mig-21s dived on Cunningham he evaded and headed for the coast. On the way out he spotted another MiG-17 and decided to attack it. What followed was one of the most famous dogfights of the entire war with the aircraft

and crews equally matched in performance and skill. After a series of vertical rolling scissors manoeuvres Cunningham fired a Sidewinder that hit the MiG which then dived into the ground. This third kill of the mission made Randy Cunningham and Willie Driscoll the first 'aces' of the Vietnam War as they had previously shot down two MiGs on 19 January and 8 May. What is more the fifth MiG was thought to have been flown by a pilot known to the Americans as "Colonel Tomb" who had built up an enviable reputation in the skies over North Vietnam.

Cunningham and Driscoll had little time to celebrate their new 'ace' status. They headed out towards the coast passing several more MiGs but as they approached Nam Dinh climbing through 16,000 feet their aircraft was damaged by an explosion from an SA-2 missile. Shrapnel peppered the rear underside of the fuselage and the starboard wing tip was blown off. At first, the aircraft appeared to be flying normally but soon afterwards the hydraulics started to fail. The aircraft pitched nose up and Cunningham flew along for several minutes causing the aircraft to alternately climb and dive as he rolled it using rudder and throttle. In this manner, they reached the coast but the aircraft was on fire and started to spin. Unable to pull out of the spin Cunningham and Driscoll ejected about five miles out to sea. The pair were soon rescued by HH-3A Sea King helicopters from HC-7 and were taken to the USS Okinawa. The incident is described in detail in Cunningham's book "Fox Two".⁽⁵⁾

USS CONSTELLATION (CVA-64)⁽¹³⁾

14:20 – Received report one F4-J side number NG-100 – Buno 155800 was shot down over water south of Hanoi, pilot CUNNINGHAM R.H., LT USN and RIO DRISCOLL, W.P. LTJG USN, were recovered by SAT helo from USS OKINAWA (LPH-3).

Statement of LT F. A. PINEGAR, (with inserts of co-pilot and crewmen)

At 13:55, 10 May 1972, three BIG MOTHER (61,62, and 65) aircraft launched from USS OKINAWA to preposition for airstrikes in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. Shortly after arriving at our preposition point, we heard our aircraft engaging MIGs over the target area. 14:10 another call was heard saying that an F-4 was hit and on fire and it was headed for the beach. At this time, I called the USS OKINAWA and the USS LONG BEACH and asked them to give us vectors to the areas. Our Tacan was inop but we determined from our charts that the three different vectors given to us were erroneous. Freeman – determining that the rescue would be in a safe area over water, I made the mini-gun safe and secured it out of the way. We then heard a call from RESCAP that the pilots were about 5 miles off the beach and that he was receiving SAM fire. My co-pilot spotted the SAM bursts and we headed in that direction. We climbed to 500' MSC and assumed communications responsibility for the three BIG MOTHERS. We passed the Rescap vectors to BIG MOTHER 65 and 61. At this time, there was a lot of traffic on the radios so I told my co-pilot to handle the Rescap calls on 1 UHF and I handled all the other calls on SAR Common. We received good vectors from the Rescap and (14:30) I

spotted both survivors smokes at about a quarter mile. Kennedy – told Rescap who and where we were, and they led us directly to the two men in the water. BIG MOTHER 65 was about 700 yards behind us, so I told him to take the closest survivor and we approached LT DRISCOLL who was about 100 yards away. We dropped our swimmer (“jump, jump, jump” Clay was tapped off)- and made a small circle and returned to a 40' hover aft and to the left of the survivor. Our swimmer had to cut loose the survivors raft line which was wrapped around his leg and the swimmer also had a hard time hooking up both himself and the survivor on the small Air Force hook. He has some difficulty in the water because his swim fin straps had broken before he left the aircraft, (he jumped without fins) . Also in the water, the brush deflector on the hook was hard to open. The swimmer gave a thumb-up and both men were brought aboard at 14:33. The first crewman checked him over for injuries and reported that he was in good condition. After he got his gear off he was walking around. The first crewman fully secured the guns and informed the pilot that all was secured aft. The Rescap A-7 overhead had evaded approximately 8-10 SAMS during the rescue evolution and as we left to return to the USS OKINAWA he escorted us out of the area. Aboard OKINAWA at 15:15. ⁽¹²⁾

Statement of ADRAN E. C. MILLEDGE, USN, 2nd Crewman of BIG MOTHER 62

On May 10th, 1972 at 13:55 BIG MOTHER 62 lifted off the deck of the USS OKINAWA with BIG MOTHER 61 and 65 for a routine pre-position in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The 1st crewman and I completed our security check with no discrepancies. I unlocked the M-16's and M-60's to set up the forward position for SAR. Put 2 M-16's in reach of the pilots and mounted the M-60. At 1415 rescap reported a SAR to BIG MOTHERS 61, 62, and 65. Rescap proceeded to vector the BIG MOTHER force to the position of the SAR.

At this time, I removed my normal flight gear and donned my swim gear except for fins and mask. I then informed the pilots I was in swim gear and up on ICS for any additional instructions.

I returned to the forward position to watch for low flying aircraft and 2 parachutes.

Rescap reported 2 chutes in the water and continued to vector us to their position.

The pilots were first to sight the survivors smoke and dye marker. I then left ICS and went aft with fins and mask to prepare for water entry. With mask on I started to put my fins on and the strap on the fin broke. I informed the 1st crewman that my fins were broken and I would enter the water without them. I then moved into position with my feet out the door. The 1st crewman held onto my shoulder firmly so our signals would not be misinterpreted. I could now see we were close to the water and that the survivors smoke was passing under the aircraft. The survivor came into my view then "slap; "slap" and on the 3rd slap I was leaving the aircraft. With my mask in position, I raised my arm to signal the 1st crewman I was OK. The survivor was about 10 feet from me and I proceeded to his position. I asked him how he was feeling he nodded and said he was OK. I inspected his flotation gear that was above water and continued to talk to him.

I was on his left side and his raft was to my left side. I went under water to inspect his left side and found he was tangled in the cord to his raft. After freeing him from his life raft, I realized we were drifting and that the raft was drifting away from us very rapidly. Upon trying to move into position to inspect his back and other side I realized he had hold of me so I got a firm hold on him and he released his hold. I continued to keep a firm hold on him after that point.

I found him clear of all objects, took hold of his "D" ring and signaled the helo we were ready for pick-up by splashing the water. As the helo came into a hover above us, I showed the survivor how to keep the water in the rotor wash out of his nose and mouth while breathing. We were drifting and the rotor wash pushed us away from the position of the aircraft. I tried to swim with the survivor to the rescue sling but. I could not swim with any force.

Again, the aircraft came into position over us and the 1st crewman got the sling to us.

I proceeded to put the sling around the survivor and after he had the sling on, I elected to hook up his "D" ring as his flotation gear made him very bulky in the sling and I felt unsafe with just the sling around him. The rescue hook was very hard to work with one hand as I held the survivors "D" ring and mine together in the other hand.

I used the "D" rings to lift up and hold the brush cap while I used the other hand to hold the spring loaded jaw open' to finish the hook-up. I gave the 1st crewman a "thumbs" and we came out of the water. We came up alongside the aircraft swinging and I used my left arm and right leg to cushion the blow and keep the survivors back from hitting the aircraft.

The 1st crewman got a hold on the survivor and I got a hold on the door and the overhead. With my feet on the deck the first crewman brought us aboard the aircraft.

I asked the survivor if he was OK, he gave me a "thumbs up" and I disconnected both of us from the rescue hook as the 1st crewman inspected him for injuries. We helped him remove his flotation gear and seated him in a troop seat. I then went forward and removed my swim gear and put on my normal flight gear. After strapping in I came up on ICS and informed the pilots I was up on ICS and I was OK.

After the survivor had a chance to calm down, rest and get a drink, we brought him forward. I gave him flotation gear and made sure he was strapped in and OK.

I informed the pilots of the survivor's position and condition and asked permission to secure all weapons in the forward position. After securing the weapons, I informed the pilots that all weapons were secure.



- 1) Numbering as per HC-7 Rescue Log accumulative rescue number)
- 2) HC-7 Rescue Log
- 3) HC-7 Det 110 Rescue report
- 4) Map – Google Earth
- 5) "Vietnam - Air Losses" By: Chris Hobson (with permission)
- 6) Unclassified Accident Report – B-3-63
- 7) Loss aircraft location data provided by: W. Howard Plunkett (LtCol USAF, retired)
- 10) HC-7 History collection; Ron Milam - Historian
- 12) USS Okinawa (LPH-3) – Deck Log
- 13) USS Constellation (CVA-64) – Deck Log

(Compiled / written by: Ron Milam, HC-7 Historian - HC-7, 2-1969 to 7-1970, Det 108 & 113)