Gull One Down

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At 0746 Zulu (Z) (14:46 PM) on 25 February 1966, a surface-to-air missile (SAM) struck and crippled Douglas RB-66C serial 54-0457 'Gull One'. The engagement occurred ten-miles northwest of Vinh, North Vietnam, while heading 270 degrees at 28,000 feet. The following best-case scenario details the mission and 'accidental' rescue of its crew. WWII RCAF veteran, Major Robert P. Walker. piloted the ECM aircraft.

Preamble:

In 1965, continued communist attacks against US troops and facilities in the Republic of South Vietnam forced president Lyndon Johnson to order a retaliatory bombing offensive against enemy targets in the southern panhandle of North Vietnam. The air strikes were directed at fuel depots, ammunition dumps, railroads, and highway supply routes within a narrow corridor between the Demilitarized Zone to a demarcation line below Vinh. Johnson refused unrestricted bombing and imposed constraints on targets attacked. On 25 February, he authorized 'Operation Rolling Thunder' to forcefully persuade Hanoi to halt its insurgency.

The air strikes began 2 March and continued until 8 May, when the president ordered a bombing halt to offer Hanoi truce terms. However, communist attacks killing US troops continued unabated. On 13 May 1965 he resumed the bombing attacks.

President Johnson opposed halting further air strikes without a reciprocal move by the communists to decrease attacks. He therefore pledged to withdraw US troops within six months if North Vietnam withdrew its troops and ceased infiltration of South Vietnam.

Secretary of defence, Robert McNamara, believed, "...the previous bombing pause too short and too hastily arranged to be effective...The conditions the US set for a permanent halt were tougher than Hanoi could accept." He urged a further suspension in bombing.

On 25 December the president authorized a bombing pause against North Vietnam. He ended the 37-day halt in air strikes on 31 January 1966 and the air offensive resumed against targets south of the 19th parallel. Over time the attacks evolved into a gradual bombing campaign moving progressively northward towards Hanoi and covering all North Vietnam.

The Mission

Late in 1965, the 41st Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Takhli Air Base, Thailand, experienced a shortage of RB-66C Electronic Warfare Officers (EWOs). Most members who originated from Shaw AFB, approached their 100-mission limit over North Vietnam, then rotated back to the USA. The USAF lacked an adequate training capacity to replace these men and desperately required EWOs.

Captain Wayne H. Smith and another officer from March AFB, flying in SAC B-52s, were selected as the first two EWO replacements. He flew his first RB-66C mission over North Vietnam in January 1966.

Smith: “At the time, having come from B-52s, I had extensive electronic-signal recognition, tape study operating an APS-54 'wide open' receiver that detected all electronic radar signals. Therefore, I was intimately familiar with the sound of an SA-2 signal.

“Upon arrival at Takhli, I was appalled to learn RB-66C crews turned off their APS-54 equipment. It fed sound into the whole aircraft, and both the pilot and navigator did not want to listen to all that 'trash'. I convinced the crews I flew with to leave the APS-54 on and the volume turned down. This still allowed me to listen to the entire electronic environment.

“Each day, Intelligence posted a chart of North Vietnam displaying active SA-2 sites in red, marked with their kill range plotted in blue circles. The intent being not to fly over the red sites and plan any orbits outside the blue rings.”

On Friday, 25 February, inclement weather over North Vietnam hampered the bombing campaign. Except for an early morning RB-66C electronic-surveillance flight, heavy clouds and rainstorms dominated the adverse conditions resulting in cancellation of all missions. That afternoon USAF scheduled another RB-66C sortie from Takhli, the only aircraft over the north. The crew consisted of pilot Major Robert Walker, navigator Captain John Kodlick, and four EWOs: Raven One, 1st Lt. James K. Beaty Jr.; Raven Two, Captain Wayne Smith; Raven Three, Captain James F. Thomson, and Raven Four, Captain. John B. Causey. Navigator Kodlick flew the morning mission and now prepared for his second flight that day.

Meanwhile, at the officers' quarters Captain James Thomson completed dressing and prepared to leave for the pre-flight briefing when his hootch mate, Captain Barney Albers, who flew the morning mission, arrived.

Thomson: “He said, 'You probably will not go anywhere except up the coast today because the weather is very terrible with ugly thunderstorms, and no F-105 air strikes are scheduled. The strange thing is we heard SAM somewhere in the Vinh area. Maybe he was in dummy mode? We

detected signals but were unable to obtain any direction-finding cuts on him.'

"When I arrived at the squadron, I told John Causey this news, and he suggested requesting a further update at the Intel briefing. During this session I raised my hand and asked, 'What about the SAM they heard this morning?' The intelligence officer replied that 2nd Air Division (AD) thoroughly denies there are any SAM sites south of Hanoi. So we accepted his word on this subject."

Takeoff from Takhli and flight across Laos to the southern panhandle of North Vietnam proved uneventful. USAF labelled this sortie an ELINT/ECM Harassment Mission.

Smith: "The day of my 13th mission over North Vietnam, our flight would take us over Vinh and then follow the coast northward and return. When we flew over Vinh the first time, I heard what I thought was a FAN SONG radar--guidance radar for SA-2 Guideline surface-to-air missile--on the APS-54 and told the Chief Raven, Captain Causey. He went to the SA-2 band and discovered the FAN SONG, but the signal slowly receded."

Smith sat in Raven Two position searching for SPOON REST (SA-2 search radar) and TALL KING radars. He noticed that when flying over Vinh, a SPOON REST radar focused continually on the aircraft, i.e. not sweeping. In other words, it was 'locked-on' which he had never heard of before.

The Chief Raven notified the pilot they had detected a radar signal and requested he fly back over Vinh. The aircraft banked and turned over the gulf, then flew towards Vinh.

Walker: "We flew a racetrack pattern back above the site at 28,000 feet to harass the SAM radar crews, 'asking' them to launch a missile against us. Acting as a decoy target, we would then verify the sites existence and pass this warning to all concerned. We possessed the capability to jam a guidance radar when it became activated and believed we could 'blind' any SAMs launched against us. Probably because of help from the Soviets or Chinese, the enemy had learned a new method of launching their SAMs--'in the blind' before activating the guidance radar."

On returning to Vinh, Smith again heard the FANSONG radar on the APS-54 and warned the Chief Raven to view the E-Band.

Thomson: "At this point both Causey and I examined the FAN SONG signal. He attempted to obtain direction-finding cuts and ordered the pilot to break left. I expended every effort to locate the exact signal, so if required, we could jam it. This was kind of remote because we carried ALT6B jammers which lacked sufficient power to be effective, and flying in a left bank, radiated the ECM signals into space."

Smith: “Then Raven One reported he intercepted a strong BG06 missile guidance signal. I looked over at his receiver and was shocked at the strength of it. It was, as we Ravens say 'off the scope'.”

Thomson: “At this point it became obvious from the guidance signals, they were going to fire, or had fired. We were in a left break. Both Causey and myself simultaneously yelled into the intercom, 'Go hard, hard left' which the pilot did. We unleashed all available ECM jammers and chaff to shield the aircraft behind this defensive wall. When the missile hit there was a violent vibration that heavily shook the aircraft. The EWO's automatically knew what had happen.”

Smith: “After the missile struck we briefly had intercom communication with the cockpit. However, as the airplane started to break apart, we lost all communication with the pilot.”

Thomson: “At that point, the interphone became erratic. It obtained power from a battery located near the aircraft's forward section. And the exploding SAM may have damaged this area of our aircraft.

“The pilot announced that if the intercom fails and you hear the front hatches blow, then eject. The intercom went dead with no further contact with the front section.”

Walker: “The explosion had been very loud and the plane thrown out of control. Fortunately for us, Captain John Causey, the Chief EWO, detected the guidance radar and immediately alerted me. His warning surely saved our lives because it provided time to take immediate and violent evasion action, which probably prevented complete destruction of both plane and crew. I instantly initiated a very steep left bank, diving turn, then back to the opposite direction.

“The first SAM exploded next to the plane causing severe structural damage and knocked the radios out of commission. I could hear a second missile explode, but it caused no further damage. During the evasive manoeuvre, I glimpsed out the left side window and observed two yellow-orange trails. I remember thinking the sun's reflection created that color--they should have been white.

“The plane's battery power lasted long enough to warn the crew over the intercom that a bailout appeared immanent. I did not know if they received this message. My attempted May Day call was, of course, unanswered.”

Navigator Kodlick: “In the cockpit we heard and felt the explosion. No one said a word. We each knew instinctively what had happened. The aircraft shuddered. I looked over my right shoulder and observed a greyish-yellow puff of smoke behind to the right rear of the aircraft. We continued to remain in the steep diving turn.”

Walker: “Both engines were still operating, but every red light in the cockpit glared ominously at me. We were still over land which was no place to eject the crew. Landing there would have meant becoming POWs or worse. I heard terrible stories about the treatment captured airmen received at the hands of civilians and in the prison camps. I did not want us to endure that fate.

“Both rudder and elevator controls were gone, but I still had aileron control and managed to level the wings. The aircraft then began going nose up, as though about to start a loop. By chopping off the power, the plane began to freefall, nose down. Then as it fell through the horizon, keeping the wings level, I applied power again to bring the nose upward. Throttles 'on', throttles 'off', keeping the wings level, up-and-down like a ‘roller coaster’--it was the only way I could fly the plane.

“The forces on the control column were so strong, I lacked the strength to push it forward. Therefore, I pressed both knees hard against the control wheel to prevent it coming back into my lap. I motioned by hand signal to my navigator and pointed toward the Gulf of Tonkin. I pointed to my watch and flashed my right hand open-and-close twice to indicate ten minutes. I prayed the plane would not explode within this period. We desperately needed to reach open water, not only to save the crew, but to deny the enemy access to our highly classified electronic equipment

“John knew what that meant. We had been briefed that in an emergency, every attempt should be made to reach and eject over the Gulf of Tonkin. A US Navy task force was located there called 'Yankee Station One'. The Navy had an aircraft-carrier with supporting ships for strikes against North Vietnam targets and the rescue of downed air crew in those waters.”

Kodlick: “The aircraft became extremely shaky. I told the pilot, 'Get over the gulf and if everything is all right, head south to Da Nang.' I gave him a heading of 90 degrees. At this time we were inland about 30 miles. Walker headed on the new course. The N-1 compass became totally unreliable, so I instructed him to turn further left, based on the Whiskey Compass. I estimated we traveled 30 miles out to sea but were a lot further south than we had anticipated, in fact, in a direction heading south.”

Walker: “We had been flying in-and-out, and above several layers of clouds with a solid undercast below. Kodlick signalled an 'OK', meaning we were probably off the coast over the gulf. Hoping it still functioned, I flipped a switch that turned on the red emergency light in the rear compartment, signalling the EWOs to eject. I jettisoned both our cockpit escape hatches. A bulkhead separated the forward cockpit from the EWO's compartment. Since the intercom system was inoperative, the

EWO's automatically knew when they heard our hatches had blown, it was time to go."

Kodlick: "The pilot gave the appropriate signal to the backseaters, but it is my understanding they never received it. He then provided me with hand signals to eject. When he blew the top hatches, I immediately ejected."

The cockpit section not only lost intercom with the EWOs, it also lost the emergency signal light/bell to the rear compartment. Both systems shared common communication linkages. Damage inflicted by the missile disabled these systems.

Kodlick: "After release from the seat, I plummeted earthward in the spread-eagle position. Unexpectedly, my oxygen mask came loose and continued flapping against my face. I reached to reattach it and immediately went into a violent tumble. I considered manually pulling my chute but told myself to wait, and then it automatically opened.

"During decent, I observed our aircraft in the far distance, almost in a nose dive downward through the various cloud layers.

"After entering a solid cloud deck, I emerged from the undercast with a vast expanse of sea below. Upon hitting the water, I pulled the snaps up on the parachute harness (canopy release) and crawled into the one-man dinghy. My body shivered so badly I hesitated to cut the chute right away. Instead, I pulled the canopy from the sea and piled it over me for warmth. Weighing over 225 pounds, plus the chute, kept me deep in water even in the fully-inflated dinghy.

"Constant motion from the large swells caused me to become seasick. Placing my head downward created nausea, so I kept my head up at all times. I switched on the emergency radio and must have heard three- or four-signal beepers. So I turned it off to conserve the batteries."

Meanwhile, the EWOs in the rear section nervously waited in silence for further instructions.

Thomson: "We heard the hatches go, and the aft compartment experienced a rapid decompression, which Capt. Causey assumed indicated an ejection from the cockpit area. Using hand signals, he immediately ordered us to initiate a controlled ejection sequence, i.e. Raven one, two, three, and four."

At the last moment, Raven One delayed initiating his ejection procedure to remove a wire-recorder cassette from his equipment. Beaty wanted to return proof of the radar signal they intercepted. He became preoccupied with extracting and shoving the cassette into his lower leg pocket. Directly behind him sat Thomson who recalls Beaty took 'a minute or so' to accomplish this task, or so it seemed. Thomson then made hand-

motions, anxiously signalling Beaty to 'either eject now' or 'let me eject'. Away went Beaty.

Thomson: “During descent Beaty prepared for seat release. The lapbelt employed a pyrotechnic devise that released him to freefall. The brief detonation caused a severe burn to his inner thigh. After splashdown, he experienced no problems crawling into the raft.

Smith: “After Raven One left, I then attempted to eject. Previously, I had flown in B-52s with the upward ejection seat. Now I became confused and experienced great difficulty accomplishing the downward ejection, possibly from being in shock. I rotated the levers but nothing happened. In the B-52, once the levers are rotated, the top hatchcover jettisons. This arms the seat and allows you to eject.

“When the bottom hatchcover failed to release, I thought a malfunction occurred. I loosened my shoulder harness to bend down and manually release the cover. From here on everything is vague and fuzzy. I recall gripping the ejection handle protruding between my legs, which is activated when the levers are rotated. When I pulled the handle to eject, everything blacked- or reddened-out.

“The next thing I remember is dangling from my parachute, thousands of feet later. Both the lapbelt release and parachute deployment worked automatically. Upon regaining consciousness, I found my body entangled in several shroud-lines, and it required considerable effort to untangle myself. In fact, one line draped over the top canopy, and it remains a mystery how I finally released it. During descent, two other parachutes were observed in the air.

“Unfortunately, I inflated the Mae West too soon. When attempting to release the seat-kit/dinghy, the inflated Mae West hindered these efforts, but it finally deployed.

“I broke from the undercast with large foamy waves below. The Navy later reported they were the roughest seas experienced in the gulf with plus 20-foot swells. Upon ditching, the strong winds pulled the inflated canopy, dragging me behind on my back through the waves. I surely would have drowned if turned opposite with my face down. It seemed forever before my fingers managed to reach the parachute-release snaps and set the canopy free.

“I pulled the inflated dinghy towards me and climbed on board. Previously, the survival kit was released prior to my entering the water. I tried forever to pull and retrieve the kit, but to no avail. Either I lacked sufficient strength or the lanyard had become entangled. Despondently, I questioned surviving my current circumstances. The Gulf of Tonkin can be frigid in February, because I never felt so chilled in my life.”

Thomson: “As soon as Beaty and Smith started to eject, both Causey and myself pulled our helmet visors down and reached for our little ‘green apple’ on the emergency oxygen bottle. The aircraft continued rising and falling, much like a roller coaster and generating variable G-forces on us. Due to this wildness, I sensed we had precious little time before the aircraft broke apart. I recall pulling the green apple, rotating the handlevers, and looking at Causey, who appeared in the process of performing the identical procedure. My floor hatch blew, so I pulled the trigger and was gone.

“After falling in space for a period of time, the lapbelt automatically released. I separated from the seat and went into freefall. Eventually, the parachute automatically deployed and opened with a beautiful canopy, but I still continued descending rapidly! Looking down, I found the lapbelt with part of the ejection seat attached, wrapped around my leg. Fortunately, I reached for my knife and cut the belt, and the metal piece fell away. Then it became a rather peaceful ride down.

“I attempted to release the life raft from my seatpack but could not pull the lanyard far enough to make it deploy. Unknown to me, I fractured the radial head on my right elbow which limited its range of motion. Even when using both hands to pull the lanyard, I still failed to muster sufficient strength to pop the seatpack open. I then decided to inflate the Mae West and felt for my emergency radio. It appeared intact and firmly secured in its proper location, and this knowledge provided me great relief.

“Finally I splashed down in the rough sea and again tried to open the seatpack, but to no avail. Thankfully, I still retained the Mae West and emergency radio. I immediately jammed the radio over the wristwatch on my left hand, then took the left hand and literally clamped it to my flying suit. I had no intentions of losing that radio-- it was my only means of survival. When I released the parachute harness, the gusty winds pulled the canopy in one direction along with the seatpack, while the enormous waves took me in the opposite direction.”

The fractured elbow and inflated Mae West limited arm movements to depress both shoulder harness, quick-release snaps. Thomson unbuckled the harness to more easily access the snaps for canopy release, then attempt opening the seatpack to extricate and inflate the dinghy. Unexpectedly, the strong force winds blew the canopy with harness away.

Thomson: “The rolling swells were huge. Maintained by my Mae West, I continued riding them almost like a surfer, going down one wave and up the other. I didn't become sea sick.”

Meanwhile, Walker strived to maintain aircraft control. Having undergone some unruly manoeuvres there was increasing doubt the jet

would remain in one piece. At this time, the aircraft remained in almost level flight, slightly left wing down. All controls then became inoperative and the plane felt as though it was breaking up. Its attitude changed to a spiralling turn in a rather violent nose high, pitch up. It was time to go.

Walker: “I lowered the visor down over my oxygen mask and pulled the green ball of the high-pressure emergency oxygen bottle.

“When I attempted to eject, my system malfunctioned--the seat would not fire. By pulling up both arm handles, which controlled the firing sequence, the control column should have thrust forward and locked against the instrument panel. At the same time, the seat would slam to the full-aft position. This provided the pilot sufficient ejection clearance through the top hatch without striking the control column. He could then squeeze the trigger grip on the right armrest to fire the M-3 initiator, which in turn, fires the ejection seat catapult - up, up and away.

“My seat failed to slam back and the control column did not stow--it continued to remain over my lap. I did not have the strength to push it forward. I released the seat lock and manually slid the seat to the full-aft position. Three- or four-hard squeezes of the trigger in the right armrest also failed to cause seat ejection.

“By now the plane went completely out of control. I tried to manually pull the seat forward in an attempt to regain command if possible. I couldn't. I then decided to stand-up on the seat and endeavour to climb out on my own. No doubt, I would have struck the aircraft structure, but this seemed my only option.

“I then decided to give the pistol grip one last squeeze before attempting this manoeuvre, and it suddenly fired the seat! This came totally unexpected because the trigger had been squeezed very hard, several times previously with no result. I was totally unprepared for the sudden ejection during which both knees and right ankle were broken by striking the control wheel. It happened so fast that I felt no pain.

“After clearing the plane, I began spinning backwards in the seat at a very high rate of rotation. Then the automatic lapbelt unlocked, releasing me into open space. I observed the seat falling away, still spinning. And so was I.

“I spread eagle to stop the spin, but found myself facing upwards with my back and parachute toward the earth. I should have been the other way around. By pulling in one arm, my body slowly rotated to the correct position, facing downward. I then stretched the arm out again to stabilize. There is a barometric parachute release set to deploy at 12,000 feet. I had plenty of altitude so enjoyed the quiet freefall while plummeting earthward. I then realized how a bird must feel soaring around in the sky. It was a nice ride down in clouds and duff weather all

this time. Finally, the chute opened with a fairly gentle tug, a lot easier than expected. Then there was 12,000 feet left.

“I continued descending in clouds and couldn't observe anything below. The visor remained pulled down and the oxygen mask still attached. I felt in good shape, no pain, although I knew that I struck the plane on the way out. No blood was present and I felt very lucky. I hoped the rest of the crew were also this lucky.

“To prepare for landing, I released the dinghy from its seatpack. It inflated as it dropped ten feet, the length of the nylon cord attached to the harness. It appeared intact and would provide me with a last second warning before hitting the water. I also inflated both sides of my Mae West and checked that they remained expanded. Then it was just a matter of riding on down.

“I broke out from the undercast around 200 feet. What a surprise! Below me appeared huge white caps of the roughest seas that I'd ever seen, even on my three crossings of the Atlantic Ocean by ship. The first occurred in the winter of 1942, sailing out of Halifax, Nova Scotia, as a Sergeant Pilot in the RCAF on board the Queen Elizabeth with 18,000 other Canadian troops. The North Atlantic proved extremely rough on that crossing, but nothing like what awaited below.

“Upon hitting the sea, the dinghy provided a last second warning to prepare for the shock of landing. Luckily, touchdown proved rather smooth, almost like settling down into an overstuffed chair. I landed on the down slope of a mighty wave and rode it into the trough at the bottom. I immediately jettisoned the parachute canopy and shroud-lines from the harness by depressing the canopy quick-release snaps at each shoulder. By doing so, the canopy and nylon shroud-lines would blow away and not pile on top of me.

“Unfortunately, the parachute canopy blew into the same huge wave that I landed in. The swell crashed over, forcing me deep underwater. The Mae West floated me to the surface underneath the canopy where I became entangled in the nylon lines. The 'chute' had been dumped over me like a collapsing circus tent. I struggled to get my head out from beneath the canopy, pulled the dinghy to me by its line and hung on with my free left arm.

“Was I going to drown? The parachute shroud-lines encircled my body, arms, and legs like dozens of live octopus tentacles, trying to drag me under. I struggled to keep my head above water as the huge waves crashed over me in steady rhythm. One after the other they came. The wild wave movements entangled the nylon lines around my body further and dragged me under. Time after time, I choked on the salty water.

“After gaining some freedom of my right arm, I slashed away at the 'octopus-like tentacles' of the shroud-lines with a knife--it was as if they were alive and on the attack. I needed to get free enough to pull myself into the dinghy. My life depended on climbing into it. Even though both sides of the Mae West were inflated and helped keep me afloat, I was still forced underwater a great deal of the time. The huge waves continued to crash over and sink me like clockwork.

“The knife, or 'shroud-cutter' as it was called, proved to be a life saver. Without it, I would have become hopelessly entangled and probably have drowned. It was a vital tool in our emergency equipment, located in a special pocket on the left leg of the flying suit with its fishhook-shaped, razor sharp, inner-curved blade kept open at all times. This insured it would always be ready in an emergency. A yard-long nylon cord secured it to the metal eyelet of the leg pocket.

“Finally, I managed to lift my left arm over the side of the raft. Each attempt to crawl in resulted in the dinghy flipping over on top of me. At last I freed myself enough to reach the narrow end and finally pulled myself in. I managed to turn around and sat in the larger section with both legs stretched out in front of me. They just touched the tapered end of the raft. A larger man would have felt cramped in such a small space, requiring him to bend his knees to keep both feet inside.

“I continued cutting the remaining lines that still clung to me and finally freed myself from the chute completely. I tossed out the small sea anchor over the tapered end to stabilize the direction of the raft in the huge swells.

“These were the biggest waves I had ever seen, later described by the Navy in the plus 30-foot range. The only comparison I could make is the introduction to the TV program 'Hawaii Five-O'. My waves crashed just like those and turned the raft over and washed me out many times. A nylon lanyard secured the dinghy to my harness, and I pulled it back to climb in again. This became the routine time-after-time. I finally became fairly well accomplished at this task, crawling back in each time this happened.

“Hours passed. Now what? Here I was sitting out in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam along with the other men, scattered over miles of stormy seas. No one knew we were down. We wouldn't be missed until after our estimated time of arrival became overdue. Even then Takhli would have to contact other stations to determine whether we landed elsewhere in the south. By then it would be too late to initiate a search mission until the next morning. I foresaw the prospect of spending a rough, dark night in the gulf.

“A small emergency radio remained attached to my harness. It would send out an emergency homing signal and also had voice communications. The emergency procedure was to broadcast a signal only about every 15 minutes. This would conserve the battery life as long as possible. If found, then voice contact was possible on the emergency frequency.

“Gradually the low-misty clouds seemed to disperse and the ceiling slowly lifted several hundred feet. To my surprise, near dusk a C-54-type aircraft flew nearby and spotted me. I had been broadcasting my emergency signal on-and-off for the entire time while floating in the dinghy. As the aircraft circled around and returned, the co-pilot tossed a smoke bomb out his side window. A smoke plume emitted when it hit the water, marking my location. I knew then that help was on the way, but it was getting late in the day.”

The Rescue

The aircraft-carrier USS Ranger (CVA 61) departed Subic Bay, Philippines (PI), on 21 February after resupply and returned to duty on Yankee Station, arriving the 24th. While the downed USAF airmen struggled to survive the rough sea conditions, two Navy aircraft patrolling the coast off North Vietnam, 'accidentally' detected a beeper signal from an emergency radio. One of the Navy airmen, Lt. Commander Clarence E. Armstrong, flying A-1J Skyraider 142080 (VA-145), recalls the events.

Armstrong: “I was flight leader of a two plane A-1J mission. We were either returning to the USS Ranger, or still on escort duty along the coast of North Vietnam, when we detected an emergency beacon/beeper. I recall reporting the beeper to the USS Ranger's E-2 and being told to disregard the signal, because it was coming from one of the other carriers in the area. It is not unusual for a beeper to be tripped during routine maintenance, but these instances are normally quickly detected and rectified.

“Because the beeper persisted along with a strong UHF/DF indication, I requested and received permission to investigate. We homed-in on the beeper, flying between cloud layers, until receiving indications that we were close to the signal source. Not knowing the base of the low-cloud ceiling, I instructed my wingman to remain at altitude while I went down for a look.”

Slowly, Armstrong descended through the clouds and eventually emerged from the grey murky undercast at 300 feet. He found the sea below churning with large white caps and forward visibility reduced by mist and intermittent showers. Now flying in reduced and variable visibility, he began scouring the area for the beeper source.

Armstrong: “I tried to home-in on the emergency beacon. The indications were erratic because there were several beacons active--a fact I did not realize until later.”

Armstrong had no knowledge several airmen were in the sea with emergency radios generating signals from different locations. By good fortune, he detected a brilliant glow in the distance from an emergency signal flare. Almost immediately, he banked the Skyraider toward this light source. Upon approach, he quickly observed a man bobbing in the swells, 1st Lt. James Beaty.

Armstrong: “Within a short time--probably within five minutes-- I sighted a flare and was able to obtain a visual on the first downed airman. I found out later that he accidentally lit what he thought was the smoke-end of the signalling device and instead set off the flare. The flare proved a blessing because the poor visibility, high-surface winds, and sea state made seeing and tracking any smoke problematic at best, a fact noted by the helicopter crew later in the recovery evolution.”

Realizing the rough sea conditions would preclude rescue by amphibian aircraft, at 0930Z hours, he urgently requested a helicopter from the nearest surface ship.

Armstrong: “I then assumed the responsibility of 'On Scene Commander' and called for a rescue helicopter. I continued to receive strong beacon signals from various directions but observed no other flares or smoke in the area. I was reluctant to lose visual on my survivor in the gathering darkness until the helicopter made contact. I do not recall how long it took for the helicopter to arrive, certainly well within an hour. As soon as the first survivor came on board, he informed the rescue crew there were five others in the RB-66 crew. This accounted for the ambiguous signals we were picking up. We then widened the search area and began to locate the other survivors by smoke and flares.

“The helicopter crew did a magnificent job under extremely difficult conditions and relatively quickly rescued four more survivors. My wingman and I remained 'on station' until low on fuel, when I was relieved by another Skyraider.”

Smith: “After what seemed an eternity, I heard and sighted a Skyraider circling overhead. It seemed after an hour, I faintly observed in the distant haze a helicopter slowly approach, stop and hover, then proceed away. I then realized the A-1 aircraft had been circling over someone else. This startling revelation overwhelmed me with panic.

“Having failed to retrieve the survival kit, I fumbled around in my vest. I found the emergency pen-gun flare kit and began shooting them skyward to signal my position. The helicopter turned around and headed towards me to attempt a recovery. Still weak and in shock, I accidentally

placed the rescue sling on backwards. Somehow, I managed sufficient strength to cling tightly until pulled into the helo. On board, James Beaty greeted me as the second crewman rescued."

Walker: "After a while I heard the sound of a helicopter approaching. In the distance appeared a very large, twin-jet US Navy Sea King helicopter to the rescue. What a beautiful sight! It slowly hovered above me and the crewmen in the rear doorway both waved as did the co-pilot. I felt elated.

"The seas were still doing their 30-foot swells and crashing over on me. The chopper hovered overhead as they lowered a rescue collar attached to a cable. As I reached for it, I slid to the bottom of a big wave and saw the collar rise high above out of reach. They tried lowering it a number of times but could never get the timing right. Every time I reached for the collar, the swell would drop me out of reach. It became a laughable situation to me, but a problem for the chopper crew. But they were very clever.

"The pilot backed off and the crewmen sank the rescue collar underwater. The pilot eased the cable towards me with the collar still submerged. When the cable reached me, I grabbed and held on as they slowly cranked it up until the collar reached my hands. I placed both arms and shoulders through and they hauled me up. The men pulled me aboard very carefully not knowing whether or not I was injured. What a wonderful feeling to have something solid under my feet again.

"The helicopter had already recovered members of the crew. Beaty explained how a Navy pilot accidentally located him and initiated the search and rescue effort.

"I moved forward to thank the pilots. It was a 'no sweat' from them. As we continued to search for the others, I stood in the open doorway behind the pilots, scanning the water below. We were only several hundred feet above the churning sea. The pilot tried to get me to sit down, but I refused.

"I braced myself against the doorway and continued scanning for survivors. Then, something like a flash of color barely caught my peripheral vision. I pointed my finger and motioned for the pilot to swing around in that direction. As luck would have it, we soon hovered above a man in the water with only a Mae West, no raft. It was Capt. Jim Thomson with only half of his Mae West inflated. The other half had torn somehow and failed to inflate. He spent several hours in the water with only half the Mae West keeping him afloat. Its amazing he did not drown."

Thomson: "Two A-1s flew over top of me. They heard the emergency signal and flew directly overhead but failed to detect me bobbing in the waves. The half-inflated, orange Mae West was the only item on my person of bright color.

“Soon a helicopter approached towards my direction and eventually spotted me. It slowly hovered over and lowered a rescue sling. Unfortunately, my injured arm hindered progress. I failed to muster enough strength to hold on tightly as the sling moved upward, and I fell back into the sea. On the second attempt, I placed the sling underneath my water wings, and the Navy finally raised me up and into the helicopter.”

Meanwhile, Kodlick lay shivering in his dinghy with parachute canopy piled on top for warmth. He also observed a C-54-type aircraft in the area. Eventually, a helicopter appeared dimly in the far distance. He fired several pen-gun flares to signal them. The helicopter soon hovered overhead and a crewman, using both hands together, made a 'diving sign' to dump the parachute and enter the water. Kodlick slid into the sea and with the rescue collar secured, was soon raised up and on board to join the other rescued members.

The recoveries occurred between 1020Z and 1057Z (add seven hours for Vietnam time) approximately 45-nautical miles from North Vietnam.

Walker: “All the crew had been recovered by the same helicopter except for Chief EWO, John Causey. We never knew what happened to John except he was ready to eject downward when the third EWO left. John should have been number four to go.”

The helicopter and aircraft continued searching for Captain Causey. The destroyers USS England and USS Mahon using searchlights, and one patrol aircraft having a two million-candlepower spotlight joined the search. Darkness forced the helicopter to return to the USS Ranger at 1206Z with five very appreciative souls on board.

Walker: “The Ranger first appeared like a postage stamp all lit up, far below us. As the pilot brought the chopper lower, the ship became larger and larger. And when we landed it had become huge.

“Our reception was comparable to a hero's welcome on Fifth Avenue with the flight deck lit brightly like a Broadway stage. It seemed every sailor and officer on board gathered on deck to cheer and welcome us, or more likely, just to watch the spectacle of their first rescue in the gulf. The Navy even provided a full military band smartly dressed in attendance playing the USAF anthem as we disembarked from the Sea King.

“As I jumped from the helicopter to the deck, my legs collapsed in pain. For the first time I realized my injuries were worse than previously thought. I felt some discomfort while bracing myself in the doorway of the chopper but ignored it as a trivial annoyance. Now two sailors had my arms around their shoulders, then managed me across the flight deck and down 17 ladders to sickbay.”

Navy personnel assisted the wet and shivering men to the infirmary for immediate medical attention. Capt. Webb, the ship's surgeon, provided 'medicinal' brandy in mugs to warm their spirits. Both Walker and Thomson received limb x-rays to determine the extent of their fractures. A corpsman applied plaster casts to both of Walker's legs, while Thomson's right fracture elbow was placed in a sling. John Kodlick suffered an arm puncture from a lead pencil in a sleeve pocket. Beaty received a thigh wound when the lapbelt-pyrotechnic device caused a burn. Wayne Smith had no injuries. All received hot showers and issued orange Navy flying suits.

The Intel officers immediately interrogated the men regarding the mission. This information provided the basis for a strike launched by the USS Ranger against the Vinh SAM site.

After Walker transferred to a wheelchair, the men were escorted to the officers' mess where a table for five awaited them, complete with a brandy bottle and steak dinner. Soon the helicopter crew arrived to say hello, wish the men well, then say good-bye before flying back to their ship.

Walker: “It was easy to see the four had put in more than a hard day's work--all needed shaves. They were a fine credit to the Navy. I am sorry they left before we could write down their names and rank.”

Later, Lt. Cmdr. Armstrong, the pilot who located the downed fliers, arrived and talked with the men. The Navy ordered both Look and Life magazine writers on board not to report in their dispatches the RB-66C loss.

The crew then retired to their assigned billets and next morning were debriefed in the Captain's quarters by the Admiral in command of the task force.

Thomson: “We were with the Air Boss having a cup of coffee. The Ranger launched an F-4 off the catapult, and we all jumped up and said, 'What was that?'

“He looked at us and said 'So that is what a SAM sounds like.' ”

Beaty, Kodlick and Smith, flew off the carrier in a twin-engine, Grumman S2F-1 Tracker aircraft to Tan Son Nhut AB, South Vietnam.

Kodlick: “The air force provided us billets at a facility in downtown Saigon. The next morning, we were all ‘dead tired’ and slept-in late. Then someone came running to awaken us, announcing a general was waiting. We immediately jumped out of bed, dressed quickly in our Navy flight suits and transported by vehicle to HQ 2nd AD for debriefing. Later, we flew back to Takhli and continued on operations. The big joke circulating among squadron members regarding the Vinh shoot down was that we really must have 'pissed them off '.”

The following day, a Grumman Tracker aircraft transported Thomson and Walker to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon. The flight surgeons cordoned off two beds on a ward of a field-type hospital for their accommodations.

Next day, wearing bright orange Navy flight suits, both men went to HQ 2nd AD-- it was not yet 7th Air Force. They entered a conference room with many Intelligence personnel in attendance and a very large map on one wall. Then the interrogation began.

Thomson: "2nd AD Intelligence claimed there were no SAMs in the Vinh area. So how did we lose an airplane?

"The senior Intel officer, a lieutenant colonel, repeatedly said, 'No, No, there are no SAMs there.'

"We went though the entire scenario two or three times. One of the points pilot Walker made was the smoke color he observed after the missile exploded. The senior Intel officer said, 'No, no. It's always black smoke and not yellow-brown smoke', or whatever it was.

"After lunch, the officer in charge of 2nd AD, Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore Jr., arrived and attended the debriefing. The Intel people instructed us to 'walk through' it again. So we detailed the entire mission once more with the general in attendance. The Operations people said the SAMs are obviously there, and we need to declare Vinh a SAM site.

"The senior Intel officer declared adamantly, 'No, there is no SAM there. We've researched everything.'

"Then a lieutenant sitting in the rear of the room raised his hand. Someone said, 'Yes Lieutenant', and he stood up and introduced himself. His function involved munitions intelligence, mainly a SAM expert for 2nd AD headquarters. During the lunch break, he researched the latest intelligence files regarding SAM smoke. And the new missiles that North Vietnam received from Czechoslovakia, or some communist-bloc country, employed a different type of explosive charge, resulting in a particular yellowish-color smoke upon detonation.

"The entire room gasped and sighed, 'wo...ooh'.

"With that, General Moore said, 'This meeting is over. It's a SAM site and declare it now.'

"He then turned to the senior Intel officer and said, 'I'll speak to you later.'

"I'm quite sure he received an interesting talk from the general."

Next day, both Thomson and Walker boarded a C-130 for air evacuation to Clark AFB, PI, for hospitalization. Several days later, Major General James Wilson, Commander of Thirteenth Air Force, presented Walker and Thomson with the Purple Heart. Next day, the men flew via air-evac to the orthopaedic ward at Tachikawa AFB hospital in Japan.

Soon after, Jim Beaty arrived from Takhli in excruciating pain with an infected thigh from the lapbelt malfunction. Six weeks later Thomson returned to Takhli to continue his combat tour. Beaty remained bedridden for three or four weeks, then took leave in the USA before re-assignment in Japan flying RB-57s.

After both knee caps healed, the doctors fitted Walker with a walking-cast, allowing his return to ambulatory status. One day a message arrived from the USS Ranger docked in Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan. The Captain invited Walker, accompanied by an orthopaedic surgeon, for a VIP tour of the ship and dinner in the officers' mess. The Navy provided ground transportation to and from the carrier. How they learned of his hospitalization at Tachikawa remains a mystery.

Upon discharge, Walker obtained transportation to Clark AFB and finally Takhli AB for return to duty. Here, the Flight Surgeons declared his legs unfit and grounded him from flying status. They shipped him to Clark AFB where subsequent medical evaluation confirmed this decision. Orders were issued, air evacuating him by C-141 to Travis AFB, California, for further recovery and eventual return to flying status.

For flying the damaged RB-66C to the Gulf of Tonkin and bailout, pilot Robert Walker received the Silver Star.

Post Mortum:

Smith: "After completing 100 missions at Takhli, I received an assignment to Wiesbaden, Germany, at HQ USAFE, Intelligence. One of my duties involved scanning through piles of Intel reports arriving each day. Most reports were discarded for shredding. One day, I noticed the word VINH. The report related to a North Vietnamese defector stationed at the Vinh SA-2 site in February 1966. Apparently, the Soviets were instructing them on how to fire the SA-2 at the time. This is probably why they were so effective that day, since the Russians probably fired the missile that struck our aircraft. I always thought it was a real professional job."

Both Smith and Walker experienced equipment malfunctions during the ejection sequence. Did variable G-forces created by the rising and falling aircraft, affect their normal operation? Did Causey also experience similar equipment problems during ejecting, or descent? Did the exploding missile damage the aircraft and hinder proper ejection?

Also ejection delays consumed valuable time in this critical situation.

Smith: "I always wondered if those extra couple of seconds I took during ejection could have been the cause of John Causey not making it? It haunts me to this day. (I have since enjoyed) 41 years of survival. I usually get drunk every 25 February and always make a ritual out of it, buying two drinks at the bar, one for me and the other for John. It means a lot to me."

Thomson: “My belief is he (Causey) never got out of the aircraft. Whether it was the G-forces, because the aircraft continued porpoising up and down very rapidly, I don't know. I told 2nd AD when they debriefed us, that I did not believe he left the aircraft.”

The official MIA/POW report states, “The number three man noticed prior to his ejection that Captain Causey had started the ejection procedure. His leg guards were in place, but he was not actually observed leaving the aircraft. His only remaining action would have been to pull up on the 'D' ring between his legs...If the seat failed to fire for reasons unknown, and by the time he unstrapped himself, climbed from his position to attempt bailout through one of the open hatches, forces from the out-of-control aircraft would have prevented his doing so...There are indications he may have left the aircraft, in that, his helmet was retrieved and an open battle dressing also recovered...None of the rescued crew members had opened a battle dressing.

“Organized search efforts were discontinued dusk of 27 February 1966.”