

8 October 1969: Neil A. Jacobs and Dave L. Stevenson Rescue

The following collage of information and details is derived from various USAF documents, commercial publications and interview. Each, details a different perspectives of the same event.

On 8 October 1969, USAF photographer Sgt. Robert E. Mitchell flew a special mission with Forward Air Controller (FAC) Nail 07 pilot Lt. James Swisher in OV-10 #67-14636 from the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron, Ubon AB, Thailand. The Bronco followed a course along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos, allowing Mitchell to take pictures of heavy damage inflicted by American air power to dwellings, roads and terrain.

En route, they observed a lone NVA tank parked on a hill overlooking the Tchepone crossroads. The tank was actually a Soviet-built ZSU-23-4 lightly armored, self-propelled, radar guided anti-aircraft weapon (23-4 indicates 23mm with 4 barrels). FAC Nail 07 requested an airstrike. Thirty minutes later two 12 TFW Phantoms arrived on scene. Aircraft commander Capt. Neil A. Jacobs and Weapon Systems Officer (WSO) Lt. Dave L. Stevenson crewed 558 TFS F-4C #63-7498, one of the two attack aircraft. Nail 07 marked the target with WP, then cleared himself from the area as the fighter-bombers began their air strike.

Both aircraft bombed the resilient ZSU. As Jacobs rolled in on his final attack, a ZSU 23mm round struck the forward fuselage. The FAC observed the WSO eject instantly, achieve a full canopy, and descend into trees near the edge of a clearing. In the OV-10, photographer Mitchell snapped away with his camera documenting the strike events and ejection as the damaged Phantom pulled away from the target area accompanied by his wingman.

The FAC orbited the downed WSO awaiting arrival of Search and Rescue (SAR) aircraft and helicopters. To determine the presence of enemy troops, the Bronco swooped uncomfortably close to treetop level and circled the jungle area. On his third dive above the jungle, the OV-10 climbed upward to clear a very high knoll. Unknown to him, his replacement FAC, an 0-2 #67-21343 Cessna Skymaster with Lt. James Searcy had just arrived, approaching towards the opposite hillside. As both aircraft passed above the ridge, the OV-10 collided with the 0-2, lost a tail boom, and both crew members Swisher and Mitchell ejected safely. The Bronco plummeted to earth and exploded in a ball of flame and black smoke. The damaged 0-2 turned towards Ubon and eventually crash landed on final approach to the base. [i] [ii] [iii]

Instead of one, three crew members now found themselves stranded behind enemy lines in Laos waiting for SAR forces to arrive. The story of Mitchell/Swisher's dramatic ordeal is detailed in "Cleared Hot," Book Two, by the FAC Association, Inc., pp. [I] [II]

Dave Stevenson, the WSO who ejected from the crippled Phantom, recounts the nebulous events:

I have a 24-hour blank period from being knocked unconscious from the speed of ejection. I pieced together the events from visits with Jake, our wingman crew, both FAC pilot and observer, and Red Willis, the PJ who risked his life to save mine, and he did it on his birthday, 40 years ago.

I recall reviewing the flying schedule the night before. Jake and I were leading a two-ship element to southern Laos. I think it was forecast cloudy, so we probably planned to perform a straight and level drop from altitude, one run and return to base. As we dropped off the tanker after refueling, we received a radio call from the Airborne Combat Control Center (C-130) diverting us to Tchepone, Laos, to support troops in contact. We made a few run in attacks on the target, and on the final pass to strafe, the SUU-23 failed, so we pulled off dry, and I think that is when we got hit.

(When the 23mm round struck the aircraft) Jake told me dust and material flew around the cockpit, imbedded in his helmet, and threw his head against the headrest, and stunned him for a moment. He heard me say, "Jake are you OK?" but he failed to answer because he was momentarily jarred numb. In the meantime, the exploding

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round blew away the windscreen and dislodged the entire instrument panel that now lay in his lap. Either I thought Jake was gone, or all the debris whipping around inside the cockpit blew me out of the aircraft--the explosion and debris may have triggered the ejection.

Our wingmen said...my parachute deployed almost immediately after observing us take a hit. I think the unprepared high-speed exit knocked me out. The seat ejected, then released me and the parachute automatically deployed. I floated down unconscious, fortunately drifting to the south and west of the bad guys. I imagine I crashed through the treetops --they're really tall there--and tumbled down through the limbs until my right ankle snagged a branch about six feet above the ground. It stopped me immediately but severely injured my right knee joint. So there I hung, trapped upside down until regaining responsiveness, then continued slipping in and out of consciousness.

In the meantime Jake did an exceptional job guiding his damaged plane towards the South China Sea. The OV-10 FAC radioed for a replacement FAC because he was low on fuel. He remained in sight until the new FAC arrived... and they then collided in midair. The original FAC and observer in the OV-10 had to eject in the middle of the bad guys. The new FAC limped back to Thailand and crash landed on the end of the runway. The rescue helicopter and A-1s finally arrived and picked up both the FAC pilot and observer. Apparently SAR did not realize there were three men on the ground, because they began to exit the area--they totally forgot about me!

About that moment I regained consciousness, and hearing their departing engines, I grabbed the emergency radio and told them in very 'unprofessional words' that I was hanging upside down trapped in a tree and required immediate help. I guided them by their engine sounds until they were over me. When the helicopter began hovering they started to receive enemy ground fire.

In spite of the small arms fire, PJ Red Willis volunteered to be lowered on the jungle penetrator. He sprinted across the jungle floor and broke the tree limb that trapped me. He carried me to the jungle penetrator, held me close, shielding my body with his until we were safely on board the helicopter. He received the Silver Star and saved my life, all on his birthday, 40 years ago.

The details of the dire circumstances surrounding Capt. Neil Jacobs' plight follow:

A ZSU 23mm round struck the left forward F-4 cockpit, blowing out the windscreen, dislodged the heavy dash instrument panel, and knocked off the throttle quadrant. The instrument panel now hung across Jacobs' lap, obstructing any immediate attempt to eject. Cautiously he maneuvered the damaged aircraft towards the South China Sea, 80 miles to the east, escorted by his wingman.

Both engines remained stuck at 100 percent military power and the throttle quadrant had been shot away. By using the engine master switches, he maintained airspeed until reaching the sea, several miles off the coast near Da Nang. He reared the Phantom upwards, then forced the control column forward, arcing the aircraft in an outside loop, thus creating a negative "G" force. Now lighter in weight, he hastily shoved the instrument panel forward for maximum space, quickly pulled back his legs and without delay punched out from the disabled, burning aircraft. The canopy jettison, ejection sequence, automatic chute deployment, and water landing worked perfectly. [III]

SAR Jolly Green (JG) 42 received notification an F-4C went down approximately 117 degrees at 15 miles from Channel 77 (Da Nang). At 0715Z (1515 local) JG42 flew en route to the location with JG04 as high cover. After locating the downed pilot, a Rescue Specialist deployed into the sea to aid Jacobs. JG 42 attempted a water landing, but strong current and rough sea created unexpected recovery problems. The helicopter pilot decided to try a hoist pickup, but each time he established a stable hover, the downwash caused Jacobs to slowly drift away. Finally, JG42 successfully accomplished securing a rescue sling and reeled Jacobs on board, then initiated a water landing to retrieve the Rescue Specialist. [IV]

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SAR forces rescued Jacobs within minutes near Mu Gia Island with no physical injuries, except a few abrasions. He resumed flying operational missions within the week. Stevenson returned to CONUS via aero-medical evacuation for further hospitalization and recovery.

JG42 crew:

AC Capt. Charles W. Hoilman

CP Lt.(jg) Robert Ritchie

FE SSgt. James E. Smith

RS Sgt. Edward K. Rendell

JG04 crew:

AC Capt. Miguel Garcia

CP Capt. Lawrence a. Marino

FE SSgt. James H. Jenereaux

RS Sgt. Wayne L. Fisk

endnotes

[I] Cleared Hot, FAC Association, Book 2, 2009, Lulu.com, p-411

[II] Chris Hobson, Vietnam Air Losses, Midland Publishing, UK, 2001. P-190

[III] 12 TFW microfilm diaries, USAF Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL

[IV] K318.221-42, USAF HRA, Maxwell AFB, AL

Robert LaPointe, PJs in Vietnam, Northern PJ Press, Anchorage, AK, 2001.