

STATEMENT OF
LT KEITH L. ELLIASON
AIRCRAFT COMMANDER/ANGEL 007/149724

On 23 April 1972, I was Aircraft Commander of an SH-3G helicopter. We had just completed a logistics run to North-western Tonkin Gulf area and were returning to the USS KITTY HAWK. We were flying at 3000' heading approximately 140° under positive radar control of the USS STERETT (DLG-31). I spotted a column of smoke rising into the air at our 2 O'clock and about 20 miles away. We informed STERETT of this and asked if they wanted us to go in closer to investigate. They directed us to turn towards the smoke. We did so and descended to approximately 500'. We then heard a beeper on guard and asked the STERETT if there was a SAR in progress in the area. They said, "yes" and we asked if we could be of any assistance. The time was 1459H. Since we were the only helo in the immediate vicinity, they started giving us vectors in towards the crash scene. I told my crew to prepare for rescue. As we came closer to the smoke, we observed red flashes at our 12 O'clock position somewhere between us and the beach. Our first thought was that they were tracers or pencil flares being fired by the survivors. The flashes kept up and we determined that it was gunfire coming from the beach. We lowered down to 100' or less and increased our speed to 140 knots. About this time, we observed an Air Force F-4 flying very low at about our 1 O'clock position and about 6 miles. The Phantom pilot directed us to head about 230° to the survivor. The survivor then came up on his radio, told us he saw us and told us to come further right. He called our roll out and said we were heading right for him. We then saw him. We could also see the beach quite clearly and it looked to be about 10-15 miles away at this time. Approaching him, I quickly maneuvered the aircraft to a hover over the survivor heading 150°. The wind was fairly calm but appeared to be from that direction. I lowered down to 10' and we jumped the swimmer into the water to aid the survivor. He quickly readied the survivor for the pickup and the first crewman again talked me over the survivor for the pickup. The co-pilot spotted a second survivor at about his 8 O'clock position and one-half mile away. As soon as the crewman cleared me, I transitioned to forward flight. At about 60 knots, I started on 'S' turn to the left arriving in a hover over the second survivor. I kept telling my crewmen to expedite as I didn't know how close we were to the beach. We let down to 10' and the swimmer jumped. We backed off to the left while he readied the second survivor. He gave us a "thumbs up" and the first crewman again talked me in for the pickup. He quickly hoisted them safely up, seated the survivors and cleared us to break hover. I transitioned to 200' and 144 knots and headed East, while the co-pilot monitored the torque and communicated our success to the STERETT. The co-pilot handled the radios throughout the SAR mission.