

“NOT in KANSAS” ⁽¹⁾
A pilot’s perspective (condensed)
(CSAR Inserts)

Compiled By: Ron Milam – HC-7 Historian

LCDR Harvey A. Eikel ⁽¹⁾ VA-93 A-4F USS Bob Homme Richard ⁽⁵⁾
Raven-316 Combat Rescuee, HC-7 Rescue 53 ⁽²⁾ 30-August-1968

LCDR Harvey A. Eikel (1935- 2013)

Glossary :

BM – HC-7 DET-110 “Big Mother” SH-3A Sikorsky Helo – combat configured –
deployed aboard Yankee Station Tonkin Gulf carriers – The SEADEVILS
CSAR – Combat Search and Rescue
OSC - On Scene Commander
SSAR – South Search and Rescue location – USS Sterett (DLG-31) ⁽³⁾
1733 – Local time

0701 BM-74 on deck of USS Sterett, CSAR rotation, received from USS Bennington for forward CSAR deployment.

Eikel’s second deployment to Vietnam, previous missions near 200. No flights allowed north of 19 degrees North Latitude, There were less SA-2 missile threat south of this line, just AAA. Originally a flight of four, since the mission was armed reconnaissance, we split into two flights of two. ⁽¹⁾

1527 BM-74 on deck, and HC-7 DET 105 Clementine One, (UH-2A Kaman Helo) ⁽⁸⁾ folded and housed in the hangar.
BM helo crew pilot LTJG Wiant, co-pilot LTJG January, 1st crew ADJ-2 Smellie and 2nd crew AMH-3 Burleson. ⁽³⁾

Eikel (1700) ⁽⁵⁾ Flying north near the end of our route jinking around 10,000 feet, approaching a heavy concentration of AAA at a town called Vinh Song, about 30 miles northwest of Vinh, when the AAA shell hit my airplane. A deafening explosion. All control systems failed. Manual flight NO radio, deep trouble, will need SAR. Not going to make it to the Gulf, headed west for jungle, near Laos. The plane rolled to the right, 360 degrees, when upright, BAILED OUT. ⁽¹⁾

At the start of our original mission there was a MIG alert broadcast by an Air Force electronic surveillance aircraft, which directed us to stay out over the Gulf while two F-8 BARCAP (Barrier Combat Air Patrol) fighter aircraft were sent on a MIG sweep. No MIGs were found and the alert was cancelled. At this point we went “feet dry” and started our armed reconnaissance mission. The two F-8 fighters returning from this MIG sweep north of the position where I had just ejected were southbound when the wingman happened to spot my

parachute in the air. They alerted the two SAR aircraft that were orbiting off the coast and that put the entire SAR effort in motion. ⁽¹⁾

As I floated down, completed ditch procedures, I hit the tops of the trees. As Dorothy said to Toto in the movie, **I wasn't in Kansas anymore**. I was in some remote jungle of Vietnam. (7 miles east of LAOS border), sitting in the parachute harness with my feet touching the ground, suspended from the parachute snared in the tree limbs far above. I was startled to see the inside back pad of the helmet covered with blood, lost my right glove and my hand had been burned. My right leg wouldn't support my weight very well and that was going to become a real problem in trying to walk any distance. I rummaged through my survival vest to find my compass, got out my survival radio and set off westward. I took my helmet, as it might be useful if I had to be pulled out through the trees. The first time I paused to catch my breath, checked my compass and got a drink of water, I immediately made radio contact with the SAR on-scene commander, who at this point was already overhead. ⁽¹⁾

LCDR Dave Moss, leading the remaining VA-93 aircraft convinced the reluctant Commodore on the USS Sterett to launch their HC-7 SAR helicopter. I was 30 nautical miles from the coast as the crow flies, but over defended areas. The plan was to escort the helicopter in south of Vinh and then northwest along the hills that border Vietnam and Laos, a route relatively devoid of heavy defenses, covering 50 nautical miles. He may have thought that the Air Force "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters based in Thailand (alerted 1747 ⁽⁴⁾) were the better equipped to handle the situation even though the HC-7 helicopter was the closest SAR asset and just as well equipped and trained as the Air Force "Jolly Green Giants". ⁽¹⁾



1730 USS Sterett over IMC - **SAR ALERT** – Helo crew having chow, jumped up, raced to flight deck, “MAKE A HOLE” as they ran through the passageways. Pilot examined charts best route to be south of Vinh Hills and west to the mountains, turning north along ridgeline to SAR location. The Sterett heels over and increases speed to obtain wind across the deck. The Clementine crew manned the chocks and chains. 1733 BM is airborne. BM-74 proceeds to orbit point. Crew learns that pilot is 220°/62 miles from current location, INLAND. Crewmen prepare

equipment and clear M-60s, proceed to the ground, following RESCAP vectors and interpreting flak charts. ⁽²⁾

With the word of my ejection and the initial prosecution of the SAR effort, it became apparent on the carrier that more forces (particularly tankers and bombers) would ultimately be required if the effort were to succeed. A decision was made to launch another cycle with those aircraft that could be quickly made available, aircraft were re-spotted, fuel and armed and launched to support the SAR effort. ⁽¹⁾

I relayed my situation to the SAR on-scene commander who happened to be Floyd Probst flying one of VA-94's aircraft. Floyd and his wingman, Mike Guenther, were the designated SAR aircraft for the mission and had been orbiting off the coast while we were conducting our armed reconnaissance mission. ⁽¹⁾

1742 – BM-74 asks for escort ⁽⁶⁾ 1752 – BM-74 goes FEET DRY (INLAND) Jolley Green Giants and Sandys are dispatched from USAF base in Thailand. Hold at Loas border. ⁽⁴⁾
Clemintine, One proceeds feet dry with jet escort. ⁽⁹⁾

The trees and other vegetation got thicker, often forcing me to literally crawl. Floyd told me that someone had pulled down my parachute and wanted to know if I was far enough away so as not to be hit if they dropped bombs on the area. I lay flat on the ground and the bombs hit to the east of my position. There was a lot of noise and a rain of leaves and branches from the blast and shrapnel. ⁽¹⁾

I just continued westward; the ground started to climb. Floyd told me a helicopter was enroute and he wanted to get a fix on my position. Sometime after the bombing of the parachute the silence was broken by a rifle shot south and down slope from my position and a shout of "come on down Joe" which froze me in my tracks. I tried to bury myself in the vegetation as much as I could and didn't make a sound. Floyd instructed me to find an open area so that the helicopter could see me when it arrived. I moved north, getting to higher ground and eventually came to an area from which I could at least see some blue sky through a thick grove of bamboo and small trees. ⁽¹⁾

1810 BM-74, OSC (VA-94) flew by in a dive marking survivor location by voice and steep pull-out. Survivor located and asked for smoke. First approach. Descending receive heavy 37mm, 85mm and 100mm AAA fire. RESCAP suppressed enough, to make a high-speed approach. ⁽²⁾

I ignited the flare the smoke only feebly penetrated the leaves, and I frantically waved my arms trying to get the smoke to go higher through the leaves. Enough of it filtered through the leaves and the next thing I knew was that the downwash from the helicopter rotor blades was blowing down the bamboo so that I could see the helicopter clearly. ⁽¹⁾

1814 USS Sterett, closes to within 12 miles of beach to be in position to receive BM-74. ⁽³⁾

1815 BM-74 observed day smoke, on second high speed approach. Survivor called us over him. Started receiving small arms fire. Increase hover altitude due to jungle debris. ⁽²⁾ Raven flight and Hoboken 402, 412-413 and Flying Eagle flight providing flak suppression. ⁽⁴⁾

Dave Moss and the other two VA-93 aircraft (Dave Maxwell and Jack Douglas) had escorted the HC-7 "Big Mother" helicopter on a westward track passing south of the city of Vinh and then northwest to the scene of the SAR. They must have expended all their ordnance trying to suppress this fire because the after-action PR release makes a statement that they were then reduced to just acting as decoys trying to draw the AAA fire away from the helicopter in what was described as one of the most heroic actions of the entire SAR. ⁽¹⁾

The rotor downwash beat down the bamboo; I could see the helicopter 100 yards away and at an altitude of perhaps 100 feet. I told him to come "easy right" and then "steady" until he was headed right at me. The helicopter hovered over me at an altitude of perhaps 50 feet and the crew dropped the hoist line attached to a jungle "penetrator" which landed 10 feet away. Actually, it went down through all the bamboo, which at this time was bent over almost flat against the ground by the rotor blade downwash. ⁽¹⁾

When the jungle "penetrator" went through the bent stalks of bamboo and hit the ground I crawled over 10 feet of stalks which were blown flat from the tremendous downwash to reach the hoist cable. The "penetrator" was buried under a couple of feet of bamboo stalks, and I couldn't pull it out. I unhooked the hoist cable from the "penetrator" intending to hook the hoist cable directly to the "D-Ring" on my torso harness. But just at the moment I unhooked the cable the helicopter lifted about 2 feet, and I almost panicked. I was holding on to the cable hook with my left hand with my "D-Ring" about 2 feet below. I struggled to stand or pull myself up 2 feet while praying that the helicopter wouldn't lift any higher when as suddenly as it went up, it came back down those precious two feet. I quickly hooked the hoist cable into the "D-Ring" and gave a "thumbs up" to the crewman who was peering down at me. ⁽¹⁾

1817 BM-74 – Both crewmen fired M-60s from port and starboard sides. Guns jammed. Copilot firing M-16 at several people on the deck, as the helo broke hover, had to stop as the hot empty casings bounced off the windshield into pilot's face. First crewman could hear small arms fire. Bullets had penetrated the fuel cell; Crewman smelled the fumes. ⁽⁷⁾

Crewman, holding M-16, brought up the cable a little at a time to determine WHO was on the hoist. Saw Rescuee and advanced the hoist speed, told helo pilot to break hover. Rescuee trailed behind BM-74. 20 seconds later the crewmen (1825) pulled the Rescuee in the aft cargo door. ⁽²⁾

The crewmen hauled me inside to my overwhelming relief. I'd never been inside one of these "Big Mother" helicopters before, but it was apparent it was set up for combat rescues. Guns mounted on each side of the fuselage and the floor was littered with empty shells. The floor was also punctured where the North Vietnamese had managed to hit it with rifle or automatic weapon ground fire during its approach or hover. ⁽¹⁾

All the crewmen were wearing olive drab painted flight helmets, olive drab flight suits and FLAK jackets. They put one of the FLAK jackets on me and one to sit on. A crewman handed

me a canteen of water and wanted me to write my name and service number on a piece of paper. Other crewman gave me a small bottle of medicinal brandy, which I gratefully downed. He promptly gave me another which I also quickly dispatched. ⁽¹⁾

It was near sunset as I looked out the starboard side door down at the countryside, I could clearly see AAA tracers. I could see A-4's roll in and bomb the AAA sites every time one started to fire. It became clear to me that there were a bunch of aircraft escorting the helicopter back out to the Gulf, which made me feel a lot better. ⁽¹⁾

1843 USAF – “NO” SDYs will escort. JGs & SDYs will hold until BM-74 is feet wet. ⁽⁴⁾

BM-74 3 minute hover, Received ground fire during exit. Headed south along the route we came in on. Through evasive maneuvers, excellent A-4 RESCAP, and on Scene Commanders from VA-94, we made “FEET WET” at 1855 ⁽²⁾. They saved our skin. ⁽⁷⁾

BM-74 “Appreciate the HELP” -

RAVEN “Any Time - Appreciate your help Big Mother”

BM-74 “ Our Job”

RAVEN – “You can HAVE IT” ⁽⁹⁾

1911 - USS Sterett observes sunset. ⁽³⁾ As the DLG came into site, 2nd crewman viewed “OLD GLORY” waving from the mast, “A GREAT SITE” ⁽⁷⁾ 1913 BM-74 is on deck, LCDR EIKEL receives medical attention.

On Deck, BM-74 is inspected by the crew. Finding holes in fuel cell, rotor blades, tail rotor and one in the support flange of the intermediate tail rotor gear box. ⁽⁷⁾

The landing platform on the fantail was barely big enough to accommodate the H-3 helicopter. Doctor led me down the port side and down a deck to the ship's “sick bay”. They gave me another bottle of medicinal brandy. As they pulled off my flight suit, they discovered the leaches on my legs. Sat me up on the examination table and excitedly started pulling them off, they found some more on my back. Anyway, they missed one behind my left knee, which I discovered later that night. The Doctor looked at my scalp wound and sutured it. They cleaned up the leach bites, my burned hand and various scrapes and scratches on my face with antiseptics. Then, into a shower to wash the rest of the grim off with some antiseptic soap and gave me Navy sick bay pajamas to wear. ⁽¹⁾

While the medical staff was starting the evaluation in Sick Bay the two helicopter pilots came in to meet me personally. We shook hands, and I profusely thanked them, I said, “I thought they were the greatest”. Surprised to learn they were two young LTJGs, Jeff Wiant and P.D. January. It was the only time I saw them, the next morning they flew off the ship. ⁽¹⁾

I spent the night in the Captain's in-port cabin, and they gave me a couple of APCs (military aspirin). The Commodore arrived, “helicopter at dawn”, laundry completed, certificate making me a crewmember of the USS Sterett. Boots and socks were muddy in box, wore flip-flops. ⁽¹⁾

31 August, USS Sterett, 0435 changes course to close on USS Bennington. 0529 closing on Bennington to transfer BM-74. 0642 BM-74 launched. 0652 Receive BM-77, 0717 Launch BM-77, 0719 Receive Log Helo 45, 0727 launch Log Helo 45. Receive BM-77 0728. ⁽³⁾

I got out of the helo. I walked toward the island structure, and the Air Boss (CDR Mundy) came up on the 1MC (the flight deck loudspeaker) and welcomed me back. Tom Schaaf (the C.O.) and others in the squadron ran out to meet me. The Flight Surgeon and a Corpsman came up to the ready room and took me down a couple of decks to Sick Bay. Cast on leg, assigned a small stateroom. People visited and I recounted the details of the rescue. The medical plan was to fly me off the ship by a COD (carrier onboard delivery – twin engine logistics aircraft) to Cubi Point in the Philippines for the evaluation of my knee once they could get approval from the Navy Hospital there. ⁽¹⁾

I was waiting in our Ready Room with the CO (CDR Tom Schaaf) to go up to the flight deck to get on the VRC-50 C-2 COD aircraft. On the escalator unexpectedly a soaking wet flight gear-clad pilot who had obviously just been picked up from the sea accompanied by a Corpsman appeared. I was startled, it was LT. Rich Curtis, a pilot from the squadron. I spoke to him for a moment since my COD was loading, but he had just ejected after being catapulted and was picked up and returned to the carrier by the plane guard helicopter. It was a strange ending to my second combat cruise, and a reminder that not all the danger was associated with the combat over Vietnam since earlier the previous CO (CDR Robert R. Wilson) was also killed on a non-combat flight. ⁽¹⁾ (Note – helicopter crash, Philippines 7-10-1968) ⁽¹⁰⁾

The longest successful rescue penetration of the Navy over North Vietnam ⁽²⁾

LTJG Jeffrie Wiant – NAVY CROSS,
LTGJ P.D. January – DFC,
ADJ-2 George Smellie – DFC
AMH-3 Donald Burleson – AM



“Jet jockeys look down on the helo guys until they are hovering over you, then you have to look up to them” by: Rick Allard – Air Traffic Controller, USS Sterett, during this rescue.

Notes: (A) LCDR Eikel looked up at HC-7 helicopter 24-May-1972, Rescue 100
(B) 2014, Rick Allard provided contact data, and the Eikel family attended HC-7 Reunion.

- (1) LCDR Harvey A. Eikel (very detailed personal diary posthumously provided by his family- 8800 words)
- (2) Helicopter Combat Support Squadron SEVEN (HC-7) rescue log.
- (3) USS Sterett (DLG-31) deck logs
- (4) USAF rescue radio logs
- (5) USS Bon Homme Richard (CVA-31) – no deck logs available – August 1968
- (6) HC-7 Rescue 53 – Audio tape, recorded on USS Sterett – provided by Don Burleson
- (7) Don Burleson 2nd crewman – phone conversation – 6-4-2005
- (8) HC-7 1968 Command Report
- (9) USS Sterett, CIC Audio Tape of rescue – provided by Don Burleson (1:17)
- (10) USS Bon Homme Richard (CVA-31) – July 1968 deck logs

Ronald D. Milam – HC-7 Historian

Born in Livingston, Montana July 1949. Residing in Livingston, Wilsall and Cutbank (Montana) until 1955, when family moved to Tillicum, Wash. Participated in scouting obtained the rank of Eagle Scout, Graduated from Lakes High School, June 1967.

Military Service:

February 1967 (age 17) joined the US NAVY on a 120 day delay program. Boot Camp in San Diego and “A” school in Millington, Tenn. completing Aviation Jet and Helicopter mechanic schools. Orders to Helicopter Combat Support Squadron FIVE (HC-5) Arch Angles, based at NAS Imperial Beach (2-1968 to 1-1969). deployed six times on different detachments, becoming plane captain for RH-3A helicopters. Second orders transferred to Helicopter Combat Support Squadron SEVEN (HC-7) SeaDevils, based at NAS Atsugi, Japan (1-1969 to 6-1970). Deployed seven times on two of seventeen different helicopter detachments, (aerial mine counter measures (Det-113) and combat search and rescue (Det-108) – North Vietnam). Advanced to ADJ-3 (Aviation Machinist Mate Third Class). Separated from U.S. NAVY June 26, 1970. Occupations while on detachments; plane captain, flight deck director, ordinance man, and helicopter mechanic. Three years and two months active duty.

Post High School Education:

1971 to 1973 Missoula Vo-Tech - Forestry Technician II – diploma

1983 to 1985 Dawson Community College – Associate of Applied Science in Land Surveying

Employment:

1970 to 1973 several temporary job; dishwasher, auto mechanic helper, concrete block co, lumber mill green chain, USFS wilderness fire researcher, diesel mechanic helper.

1973 to 2009 private engineering and land survey company (Missoula). I advanced from rodman, crew chief, to Professional Land Surveyor (Montana & Idaho). Managing survey crews, conducting surveying and engineering projects in the western USA and Alaska. (Retired January 2009)

Volunteerism:

1975 to 1983 Missoula County Sheriff’s Search and Rescue (member 4 yrs – Chief 4 yrs)

1979 to 1983 Missoula County Sheriff’s Reserve Deputy

1988 to 1995 Lake Missoula Dive Club – president / safety officer

1993 to 2008 Montana Association of Registered Land Surveyors – Quarterly Magazine -Editor

2001 to present - Helicopter Combat Support Squadron SEVEN– Historian
[www.hc7seadevils.org]

2004 to present – Vietnam Veterans of America – Life Member

Summers 2011 and 2012 - USFS Lolo National Forest – Land Survey Depart.

2009 to present – Western Montana Veterans Cemetery – grounds keeper

V. V. A. – Chapter 938:

2004 to Present, participating in fund raising and Stand Downs to assist the Veteran community.

2008-2012 designed, surveyed and construction oversight for the **Veterans Monument** –
Hamilton Montana (dedicated May 2013)