

# **Clementine Two**

## **U.S. Navy night rescue over North Viet Nam**

**By C. LeRoy Cook, HC-7 Det 104**

Come with me back in time to 1968. You may have watched “Laugh-In,” the Smothers Brothers, and the original “Mission Impossible” on television. On the big screen Dustin Hoffman made his debut in “The Graduate.” Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger squared off in “In The Heat of the Night.” “2001, A Space Odyssey,” and “Bonnie and Clyde” competed for Oscars.

In 1968 the #1 swimmer in the world was an 18-year old Mark Spitz. Arthur Ashe was the first African-American to win the US Singles crown. Jackie Kennedy became Mrs. Aristotle Onassis. Robert Kennedy was assassinated in a hotel kitchen as he left a political rally.

Outside America, Russia invaded Czechoslovakia. In Viet Nam the North Viet Nameese launched the Tet Offensive and Gen. Westmoreland deployed 25,000 troops to Khe Sanh in anticipation of a major Viet Cong attack.

USS AMERICA (CVA-66) was on its first deployment to Yankee Station in the Tonkin Gulf with the “Tarsiers” of VF-33 embarked. The squadron took its name from a small, nocturnal, East Indian mammal related to the lemurs. Reportedly, pound for pound, the toughest animal on the planet. Two members of VF-33 would be tested to live up to that reputation.

On 18 June, 1968 LCDR John (Claw) Holtzclaw launched at 2300 hours (Hotel) from AMERICA into a moonless, pitch black night. Claw flew a F-4J, call sign Rootbeer 210. His Radar Intercept Officer, LCDR John (Zeke) Burns was in the back seat. With Zeke as the flight leader they joined with two squadron mates in Rootbeer 214 and an A-6 Intruder (Buckeye 504) from VA-82 and headed for North Viet Nam. The three aircrews were to conduct a night “pouncer” mission searching for “movers,” trucks carrying supplies to “Charlie,” NVN forces in South Viet Nam.

On several previous missions there had been encounters with MIGs which became the impetus for creating the Top Gun school in NAS Lemoore. If you saw the popular Navy recruiting film of that name you know the purpose of Top Gun is to train pilots in dog fight tactics. And, if you saw the movie, you are familiar with the penchant of jet jockies for nicknames. Claw and Zeke were jet jockies.

We helicopter pilots were more mundane. I called my pilot Clyde and he called me LeRoy – although, there was an incident that prompted a ship CO to refer to us as “Bonnie and Clyde.” That is a story best left untold. I did enjoy reminding jet jocks that I couldn’t distinguish them from a primary student when they were in the water waving at me.

Tactics for pouncer missions called for the supersonic F-4s to fly above and behind the subsonic A-6. The A-6 crew would detect a moving ground target on their radar, pinpoint it by dropping one or two 850 lb. CBU-24s, and vamoose. Each CBU contained 500 small cluster bomblets. When the CBUs caused a secondary explosion the F-4s would diverge, climb, and then pounce. The lead plane dove on the target and illuminated it with high intensity parachute flares. The wingman then dove on the target, dropping 500 lb Mark 82 bombs or firing 5" Zuni rockets. Then the two aircrews traded roles until they expended their ordnance and returned to the carrier.

This night the section of F-4s and the A-6 were to make two circuits 120 miles north of the DMZ and return to AMERICA. In the back seat of Rootbeer 210 Zeke monitored his radar scope and other electronics for signs of enemy activity. On the first run he heard the two-tone “SAM song” in his headphone – “Voop – Vuuup” indicating the search sweep. The tone would increase, becoming a steady “Vuuup-Vuuup-Vuuup” tone when they were locked on. He ID’d the SAM site and commented to Claw, “I hope that guy doesn’t decide to shoot because he is pretty hot stuff.” Most Viet Nameese operators were novices and usually took six or seven sweeps to lock on. But that guy locked on them in a couple of sweeps. He was good. Zeke thought he maybe a Russian.

On the second run through the circuit Zeke heard one “Vooop – Vuuup” followed by the steady “Vuuup-Vuuup-Vuuup” tone. The guy had locked on them. Then Claw and Zeke saw two SAMs leave the ground about ten miles

in front of them.

If you have never seen a SAM it is about the size of a telephone pole – 38 feet long and 19 inches in diameter. The evasive tactic of the day was to let the missile close until the last moment and then make a tight turn into it. The F-4 turned tighter than the SAM and it -- theoretically -- would fly past to land somewhere in North Viet Nam.

Claw jinked left and jiggled right. He successfully evaded the two SAMs but in doing so, lost altitude and descended perilously below the surrounding mountains. Low enough that Zeke yelled to him “Pull up, pull up. You’re going to fly us into the ground.” Claw jettisoned his bomb load and went to afterburner as he tried to gain airspeed and climb back to altitude. Rootbeer 210 floundered. He was where no pilot wants to be, “Out of airspeed, altitude and ideas” as he and Zeke watched a third SAM hit Rootbeer 210 on the starboard wing, tearing off the outer third portion.

There was a blinding flash. Imagine standing in a cave where there is no light, pupils fully dilated, straining to see anything, and then having someone trigger a dozen flash bulbs inches from your face. The two aviators were not only momentarily blinded but they were also disoriented. The gut-wrenching impact of the SAM was like flying into a brick wall at 500 knots.

Rootbeer 210 was now on fire. Claw transmitted a quick Mayday and called to Zeke over the ICS, “Get out, get out.” He then initiated command ejection just as Zeke was reaching for his ejection handle to do the same. A ball of fire under the Martin Baker ejection seat sent Zeke somersaulting back over the vertical stabilizer, barely missing it by a few inches. A nano-second later, the timed sequence ejected Claw as the F-4 departed flight and pitched nose down. In the ejection Zeke fractured his right leg, sprained his left ankle, and compressed a vertebra.

Silence engulfed the two aircrews as they descended into the black night near Vinh Son, North Viet Nam. Hanging in their parachutes as they gently descended into the darkness, they talked to each other across the space, making plans to rendezvous and evade capture. They heard voices of people on the ground and decided if they could hear the North Vietnamese, the NVNs could probably hear them. Each knew they were a long way from friendly forces. Instead of returning to AMERICA for a routine debrief and, perhaps some “midrats” from the wardroom galley their mission had become anything but routine. They were in for a long night. Hopefully, it would be only this one night. Lady Luck would have to smile broadly on them if they were to avoid checking into the Hanoi Hilton for an extended stay.

At ten minutes past midnight, 19 June, Radioman First Class Joseph Whitefall was standing watch in the Combat Information Center of USS PREBLE (DLG 15). He received Claw’s Mayday call that set in motion rescue operations.

Previously, in the PREBLE wardroom that night I had watched a movie, a forgettable, probably black and white, 35 MM two-reeler. About the same time Claw and Zeke launched from AMERICA I pulled the blanket to my chin and went to sleep in my stateroom.

I was the Assistant Officer-in-Charge and co-pilot of Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven (HC-7) Search and Rescue detachment 104. Clyde Lassen was the OinC and primary pilot. We were both LTJGs but he had seniority and had been co-pilot of a previous combat SAR detachment. We were stationed on north SAR while another HC-7 detachment was on south SAR below the DMZ. They were Clementine ONE and we were Clementine TWO. Each detachment had eight enlisted maintenance men, three of whom were designated rescue aircrew. We flew with two on every mission – a hoist operator and a rescue swimmer.

Our respective missions were to rescue aircrew who successfully made it “feet wet” and ejected over water. If the Claw and Zeke’s mission had been flown during the day, we would have been notified and pre-positioned about 20 miles off the North Viet Nam coast, flying a race track pattern – just in case. The night of June 18 we were on 30-minute stand down with no expectation of flying.

As a LTJG I had been in the Navy two and one-half years. HC-7 was my first operational unit. The squadron was homeported in NAS ATSUGI, Japan, a former kamikaze training base located an hour from Tokyo on the plains at

the base of Mount Fuji. I reported for duty in January 1968 five months after HC-7 was commissioned. Two months after reporting aboard I was assigned to Combat SAR Det 104 and we deployed to the Tonkin Gulf in April. We first stopped in NAS Cubi Point, Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines where we were assigned our helicopter and embarked in USS PREBLE (DLG 15).

At midnight, 18 June, Japan and my squadron mates were thousands of miles away and I slept peacefully in my stateroom a few yards forward of the flight deck where Clem TWO was tied down.

At 0012 hours “SAR Alert, SAR alert, Now Flight Quarters, Flight Quarters” blared on the One-MC speaker in the passageway. Coming instantly awake, I jumped out of my rack, into my Marine fatigues, and ran aft to the flight deck. Clyde went forward and up one deck to CIC to be briefed on the situation.

Strapping into Clem TWO I sped through the checklist and started the engine. I left the rotor brake engaged and waited for Clyde to come from CIC. The ship was in a darkened state with only red lights flooding the flight deck to preserve what little night vision we had developed. Aviation Electrician Second Class Bruce Dallas and Aviation Jet Mechanic Third Class Don West were our two rescue crewmen that night secured with gunner’s belts in the cabin behind me. The gunners’ belts kept them from falling out of the helo but allowed them to move around in the cabin to operate the rescue hoist and man the two, door mounted, M-60 machine guns. Both wore helmets that were connected to the ICS so we could talk to them.

Clyde strode purposefully across the flight deck and strapped into the right seat He took control of Clem TWO, released the rotor brake, and, ten minutes after SAR alert was sounded, we launched. It was a horizon-less, black-ass night. There was no moon which made take-off from the flight deck of the Preble – about eight feet above the water – nerve-wracking. Before the night was finished, the lack of a moon would be our best defense.

At this point let me provide a brief description of the H-2 Seasprite – our Clementine TWO. The Navy is the only service that flew H-2s. The original Alpha/Bravo model had one General Electric T-58 jet engine that powered four rotor blades. Some commercial aircraft used T-58’s as an Auxiliary Power Unit to start their “real” engines. Kaman Aerospace initially designed the H-2 to provide carrier-based plane guard duty for pilots who experienced a “cold catapult” or could not land aboard the ship too far away to divert to a land-based airfield. The helo was relatively small but with a crew of three it could pick up four survivors.

In 1968, the concept of using the H-2 as a combat rescue vehicle was a recent one. Certainly, flying a helo from the fantail of a destroyer was untested. Previously, the Navy tried flying remote controlled drones from destroyers to detect submarines. Too many drones flew over the horizon never to return. Then came Viet Nam and the Pentagon brass thought if they put pilots in the cockpit we would be more likely to bring the helo back to the ship. In 1968, combat SAR dets had operated in that environment about a year and a half but we were still, very much, an experiment. We were embarked on surface ships unaccustomed to having an Air Department. The flight decks had been shoe-horned among several protrusions sticking up that dented more than one helicopter – largest among the obstructions was the missile launcher that was about ten feet from the rotor system. Using a modern day computerese term, we were a Beta test operation.

The Navy had Kaman install ¼-inch armor plating around the most critical flight components in the engine compartment. They installed small armor plate wings hinged to the pilot and co-pilot seats for us to hide behind. M-60 machine guns were mounted at the two, opposing cabin doors. Small, rectangular plates were mounted to the cabin deck at each door and hinged for the crew to raise and crouch behind. Our protection was minimal at best. During one rescue attempt by a different crew a round pierced the armor plate, wounding the crewman in both legs. As co-pilot, I had a M-16 and a M-79 grenade launcher. Oh yes, and we each carried a 38 cal. service revolver – a formidable weapon against an AK-47. We had none of the sophisticated electronics in the cockpit as our jet brethren enjoyed to warn of external threats.

With a full fuel load and the high humidity and high density altitude of the Tonkin Gulf the armor plating put the helo over max gross takeoff weight. We had two external fuel tanks but could never take-off with a full fuel load. Even with a partial load, we frequently launched with one crewman, dumped a few hundred pounds of JP-5, and returned to pick up the second crewman. Routine take-off procedure was to lift into a hover, gently ease forward

over the deck edge, and dive to the water to increase airspeed as we flew about five feet above the water until airspeed exceeded sixty knots.

Take-off was tricky during daylight ops. It was unnerving on that moonless night at 0022 hours. The pucker factor in Clem TWO was pretty high until we climbed above 500 feet, headed for North Viet Nam. We were to enter a standard holding pattern and bore holes in the night sky 20 miles off the coast to await further instructions. During the transit Clyde briefed us of the situation. He handed the chart of North Viet Nam to me. It was marked with black, overlapping circles that indicated threats to any aircrew who dared to venture into "Indian Country."

There were numerous AAA sites up and down the coast. On previous missions, as we flew our racetrack patterns, we watched some fire on strike aircraft when they went feet dry. Our ¼-inch armor plating and M-60s were no match and we certainly couldn't fly as high or as fast as the jets. The survivor's suspected position was 20 NM inland near some NVN villages. Many indigenous natives surrounded Zeke and Claw's wagon train – if they had not been captured. The NVNs had a nasty practice of surrounding downed pilots and using them as bait to lure others into their trap. They could capture at anytime they wanted the pilot who thought he was successfully hidden and evading capture.

Before attempting to rescue a downed aircrew three criteria had to be met – the on scene commander (usually the rescuer's wingman, whose objectivity was fallible) had to have visual contact, the survivor(s) had to successfully provide personal information he left on file in his squadron (mother's maiden name, favorite dessert, favorite color – things like that.), and there were to be no enemy forces in the immediate vicinity. All three criteria had to be satisfied – no exceptions. Clyde and I believed we would be called back to the PREBLE to wait for daylight. A night rescue over North Viet Nam had never been tried.

We were certain any rescue attempt would require the Air Force concept of a rescue – a full fledged, coordinated operation with Jolly Greens out of South Viet Nam supported by a squadron of strike aircraft to first pulverize the surrounding area. That would take hours to coordinate. Any moment we were certain we would be told to return to base.

Then the call came from "Harbormaster," the call sign of Commander Destroyer Squadron ONE who was responsible for SAR operations on Yankee Station. The rescue was a "GO" and we were cleared to go feet dry. Radioman Alan Melton in PREBLE CIC gave us vectors to proceed inland. We headed for an area on the chart where the black circles didn't overlap too heavily. I asked Clyde if he thought we had flown up and down the coast long enough to wake up the AAA watch standers and get their attention.

Meanwhile, on the ground Claw and Zeke had landed in a manure-fertilized rice paddy and made their way up a small, jungle-covered hill. The jungle was so thick the only way they could progress was to make short kicks at the undergrowth. When that became unsuccessful they got on their hands and knees and lunged at the entanglement as one would lunge at a football tackling sled. They made it half way up the hill to a small clearing where they waited for us.

We crossed the beach at 5,000 feet, south of a known AAA site, and turned north, flying on the inland side of a mountain range over a valley. We hoped the mountain range would provide cover from the AAA. It appeared the AAA watch standers were still sleeping. Ahead of us about thirty miles and to our left, the burning F-4 cast a bright red-orange glow, silhouetting the mountains. In the cockpit of Clem TWO we discussed what we were likely to find once we arrived on scene and reviewed our respective roles. The conversation was different that night, 5,000 feet over NVN, than when we had discussed the theoretic probability on the ship in the sunlight or when we practiced for this possibility at NAS CUBI PT.

The night was tranquil, the air was stable – it was a good night to be flying. Then, close aboard on our port side and a little below us I saw a long trail of sparks whiz past the helo – so close I heard the loud "Whoosh." Whatever it was, it missed us. Thankfully, the H-2 has a very skinny profile head on. We continued up the valley toward the burning F-4.

Overhead, RESCAP, another jet, directed us around the AAA and SAM sites to Zeke and Claw's location. Every

pilot carried in his survival gear a pencil flare, a strobe light, and a PRC-63 handheld radio. The PRC-63 had two channels for communication and transmitted a distress signal on Guard. In our cockpit an Automatic Direction Finding (ADF) needle homed in on their PRC-63 and gave us a heading to fly -- accurate to +/- 10 degrees. We could only fly in their general direction and hope to better pinpoint their position when we arrived on scene.

We asked for a strobe light. The dense jungle shielded it. They fired a pencil flare but it couldn't pierce the dense jungle canopy. Then they fired a magnesium tracer from their 38 cal. That helped us locate them. They were 20 nm east of the coast and at least ten miles west of the F-4 crash site. We arrived on scene at 0141 hours.

RESCAP dropped a parachute illumination flare -- the same kind the F-4 would deploy to illuminate their targets. It is a canister of phosphorous elements that burn as it descends slowly in a small parachute and provides a bright, artificial light for a few minutes. The flares lighted the ground below similar to a full moon. There was a small, jungle-covered karst with rice paddies toward the coast separating what looked to be two small villages consisting of a few huts.

After arriving overhead, we made a rapid, spiral descent from altitude. We had practiced this at CUBI PT. So far, so good. During the descent, both Bruce and Don reported seeing another ball of fire pass close by beneath us. They thought it to be a missile, the second one fired at us that missed.

Our next problem was the jungle. We located Claw and Zeke but they were surrounded by trees. Some were about 200 feet tall. That presented a problem for us. The hoist cable was 150 feet long. We asked for a strobe light to pinpoint them. The trees kept us from hovering directly over them. Clem TWO had not developed any more power since we left PREBLE and when we tried to hover our RPM drooped below 100 percent. Clyde waved off and told me to dump fuel as we circled to try again. One of my contributions to the mission is I stopped dumping fuel without waiting for direction from Clyde.

On our second attempt to hover we descended below the treetops and next to a very large tree so our hoist cable could reach the ground. The fit was very tight with tree branches a few feet outside our rotors. Bruce reported he saw the survivors and began playing out the cable with a jungle-penetrator at the end.

It passed within inches of Zeke's outstretched hand but, entangled in the undergrowth, he couldn't get to it. In retrospect it is probably best he didn't reach it. Clem TWO was maxxed out and I doubt we had enough power to pick up both survivors and maintain our 150-foot hover. If Zeke and Claw had hooked up to the cable I know they would not have let us leave without them. They probably would have pulled us down and Bruce would have had to cut the cable as he winched them aboard.

Then the parachute flare burned out. Without the electronics available today, helicopter pilots must have visual cues to hold a stable hover. When the lights went out the visual cues were gone and we couldn't see anything. Clyde broke hover and started to climb above the trees. He didn't know he had drifted into that very large tree.

The helo pitched nose down and right when a limb caught the horizontal stabilizer. Bruce Dallas, who had been leaning out the starboard door guiding the rescue cable, was hit in the face by another limb. Miraculously, we broke free of the tree and climbed to altitude where we circled and waited for another RESCAP to bring more flares.

We told Zeke and Claw we couldn't get them out of the jungle and they had to make their way off the hill to the rice paddies. Their ordeal had sapped their strength and now they had another 100 yards to go to the jungle edge. Sometime, when they were tackling the jungle undergrowth, Claw lost his survival radio. It transmitted the distress signal on Guard the remainder of the rescue and interfered with our ability to communicate with them.

By this time, everyone in the surrounding villages was awake and running toward us across the rice paddies, shooting at us. We could see their muzzle flashes -- all small arms and some automatic. The mid-air with the tree damaged the horizontal stabilizer and tail rotor. Clem TWO developed a vibration that felt as if we were taking multiple hits. Then Don West, manning the M-60 in the port cargo door, and I saw much larger muzzle flashes. As if on cue, we both returned fire with a loud staccato that shattered the relative quiet of the cockpit. Hot casings ejected from my M-16, ricocheted off the windscreen, and hit Clyde in the face.

He instinctively felt his face and, in the darkened cockpit wiped a warm, sticky, wet liquid from his face. "I'm hit." he said over the ICS – which got my attention. I prepared to take the controls. Then he licked his fingers and reported, "It's just sweat, I'm OK."

Aircraft from USS ENTERPRISE arrived on the scene with more parachute flares and we were back in the rescue business. A few minutes passed before Zeke called us in and we made our approach to a gently sloping area across the rice paddies from the village and NVNs. The jungle edge was about 100 yards to our left with the terrain sloping toward us. The wheels sunk in the soft mud and Clyde held the weight off them in a modified hover. No chance to relax. There we waited, nervous, senses alert. Bruce fired his M-60 at the advancing throng on our starboard side. Don and I watched the jungle on the port side. Then Zeke said they weren't at the jungle edge yet and we took off.

Again we circled overhead waiting for him to call us back. They reported they could hear people running all around them, apparently on paths the NVNs were familiar with but Zeke and Claw couldn't use. The number of muzzle flashes aimed at us from the rice paddies increased as more people converged on our landing site. They must have been firing blindly at our sound. I doubt they could see Clem TWO's dark grey paint scheme against the black night. It was only when we were on the ground that the NVN could see us in the light of the parachute flares. As we circled we could see an estimated 80 to 100 people on the ground stumbling across the rice paddy dikes. We circled several times before Zeke called us back.

Again we made our approach and hover-landing. Again, anxious moments dragged by as we waited. Again Zeke told us they still were still entangled by the jungle. When we departed I saw the circle of people getting smaller and closing in on our landing site from our 2 o'clock position. A second group had formed and was approaching from our twelve o'clock.

In the jungle, the North Viet Nameese were closing in on Zeke and Claw from behind. Zeke later said the NVNs were about twenty yards behind them but the jungle that held them also kept their would-be captors at bay. That didn't keep the NVNs from shooting at them, though. Bullets whistled past their heads and struck the ground beside them with a "thwock!" Their adrenalin kicked in as they made a dash for the jungle edge. They called us back for our fifth attempt to rescue them. Time was running out.

This time, as we descended through 100 feet on approach, the parachute flare again burned out. Once again, the pitched black night came rushing in on us. Instead of waving off, with a flick of his left thumb, Clyde turned on Clementine TWO's external lights. The H-2 had two fixed lights in the nose that shone to the left and right and a spotlight we could control to shine ahead. A third, hover light, shone straight down from the underside. Lighted up like a Caribbean cruise ship we made our approach and landing to the rice paddy. There we sat, silhouetted in circles of light. Now, the NVNs closing in and shooting at us were close enough we could see features of their faces. They were less than a hundred yards down the hill – a good pitch shot to the green – but still hampered by the dikes.

Inexplicably, Bruce appeared alongside the helicopter and peered around the nose toward the jungle. Clyde told him in direct language to get back in the helo, which he did, and began firing his M-60 from the starboard door as Don and I kept our weapons trained on the jungle edge. Our lights cast shadows and we couldn't see as well as we had in the light of the flares.

Suddenly, two figures wearing dark clothing burst from the jungle and ran toward us. I told Don to keep them covered. "If you see anything that looks like a muzzle flash, start firing." But Zeke and Claw weren't about to start shooting at us.

As they ran, stumbled, fell, and staggered down the hill toward us we began taking fire from the jungle edge where they had just emerged. We would not have had a sixth opportunity to rescue them. Don and I returned fire as Zeke and Claw crossed in front of the helo to the starboard side. People were now shooting at us from our front, left, and right sides. I couldn't see our six o'clock to determine if we were completely surrounded.

Despite his fractured leg and other injuries, Zeke beat Claw to Clem TWO. When he got to the starboard door

Bruce stopped firing, grabbed him and, with one hand, threw him into the cabin. He landed on his stomach with a thud. Seconds later, Claw entered the same unceremonious way, only inverted.

Bruce tapped Clyde on the shoulder and manned his M-60. At 0225 hours we made a full power climb-out with M-60s blazing from both sides. Immediately we were flying on instruments, climbing to altitude, and headed for the coast. We flew north above the 19<sup>th</sup> parallel and then turned for the nearest friendly force, USS JOUETT (DLG -29). Bruce slid the starboard cargo door closed as we passed through 1,000 feet but it was damaged when we hit the tree and flew out of his hand to become a NVN souvenir. Inside the cabin there was pandemonium. Zeke's PRC-63 transmitted the emergency locator signal with an ear-piercing "peeong, peeong, peeong" and overrode vector directions out of Indian country and communication in the helo on ICS. Clyde shouted to "shut that @%#\$ thing off if you have to strip them naked." Finally, someone turned it off. Climbing to 4,000 feet we flew north above the 19<sup>th</sup> parallel and then turned for the nearest friendly force, USS JOUETT (DLG -29).

The emergency caution panel pierced the darkness and the Low Fuel light let us know we had about 20 minutes of flight before flame out. There was no time for evasive maneuvers. We had to get feet wet and as far away from the North Viet Nam coast as we could in case we had to ditch. We knew there were AAA sites along our flight path and hoped everyone there was also asleep. As we approached the coastline I looked across at Clyde and saw what looked like a handful of flaming arrows coming at us at our altitude. Over the ICS I yelled "Get down" as I hit the collective, losing 1,000 feet and scaring Clyde for the second time that night. Fortunately, whatever it was burst about a mile away. Finally, we were feet wet and the unfriendlies were behind us.

With vectors to USS JOUETT, Harbormaster's flagship, CO, Capt. Robert Hayes, closed within 3 miles of the coast, well within the range of shore artillery, and turned JOUETT into the wind to receive us. At 0225, two hours after departing PREBLE we landed safely aboard JOUETT with 135 pounds of fuel indicated on the gauge – approximately five minutes of flight if the gauge was accurate. Not enough for a wave-off and another approach. My decision to not wait for Clyde to tell me to secure the fuel dump switch was a good one.

By this time Zeke's adrenalin had worn off and he couldn't walk on his fractured leg. Ship personnel helped him to sick bay from Clem TWO's cabin. Clyde, Claw, and I went to the wardroom to debrief Harbormaster where we received a therapeutic prescription of medicinal brandy. In the debrief we concluded Claw and Zeke could not have been rescued during daylight because of the heavy concentration of small arms fire in the area and the AAA and SAM sites in close proximity. The surprise of a night rescue was essential to successfully extracting them from their hostile environment.

After the debrief JOUETT assigned beds for us but I couldn't sleep. As dawn broke I made my way to the flight deck. Bruce and Don were already there. They had been given a bottle of scotch and the three of them spent the night on the flight deck. In the morning light we looked for the bullet holes we had felt hit the helo as we circled the NVNs. We couldn't find any – not a single bullet hole! We had been over North Viet Nam and under pretty intense fire for one hour – had two missiles fired at us – and left unscathed. The dark grey paint scheme against a black, moonless night had camouflaged us from those on the ground who apparently had shot at our sound. When the bullets arrived, we were no longer there. A month later, during a routine maintenance inspection, we found one slug lying in the tail pylon.

On 16 January, 1969 LT Clyde Everett Lassen was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in a ceremony in the White House by (then) President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Three Navy pilots were awarded the MOH for action in Viet Nam, including POW Adm. James Stockdale. Clyde was the only Navy helicopter pilot to receive the nation's highest award.

HC-7 was decommissioned 30 June 1975. In its short 7 year, 10 month existence squadron personnel rescued 156 survivors. 60 rescues were in combat environments including former California Congressman Randy (Duke) Cunningham. The Navy does not keep records of individual decorations cross-referenced to the unit in which they served but HC-7 is arguably the most highly decorated squadron of the Viet Nam conflict. In addition to Clyde's MOH, four people received Navy Crosses, two were awarded Silver Stars, and three earned DFCs. Many more earned every other medal for bravery in the hierarchy. In 1969 President Richard Nixon awarded HC-7 the Presidential Unit Citation. There is a website, [www.hc7seadevils.org](http://www.hc7seadevils.org).

On 6 November, 1999, at Ingalls Shipyards in Pascagoula, MI, Barbara Pilling, wife of Vice CNO Adm. Donald Pilling, and Linda Lassen, christened USS LASSEN (DDG 82), in memory of her late husband. Clyde died April 1, 1994 of cancer. He was 51. The LASSEN is an Aegis class destroyer that is home to another helicopter detachment with two SH-60 Seahawks.