

The Rescue of “Grumpy” Grimaldi

While I do not recall the exact date of the events written about here, I am certain the date can be determined through aircraft records or the recollections of others involved. I sincerely doubt that anyone who was a part of the mission that day will ever forget it. I will simply say that I believe that the events related herein occurred in late 1968 or early 1969.

All of this occurred during a mission that I was sworn never to talk or write about. I did not speak of this or other related missions for many years after returning from my tour of duty in Vietnam. Early in my tour, I and others raised our right hands and took an oath of secrecy before taking part in these missions, the existence of which was denied from the highest levels of our government. As a result, I only began to speak of these matters after reading several books that detailed a number of the missions from the point of view of some of the Special Forces soldiers.

The weather that morning was not a limiting factor as we took the usual steps necessary to plan a routine extraction of a U.S. Army Special Forces team at the end of their planned mission in Laos. The fact that we might call such a mission “routine” seems bizarre in retrospect and was an indication of just how inured we had become to the extreme danger we faced during these missions conducted in the areas of Laos and Cambodia that were under the absolute control of the North Vietnamese Army. We did “routinely” face 37mm and 51 caliber anti-aircraft fire in addition to small arms (as we would on this mission). Such missions did not often end as planned. Hot extractions, with the enemy in pursuit were the rule rather than the exception, and I had experienced more than my share of in-contact, on the run, McGuire rig team pickups during the months that my unit, the 57th Assault Helicopter Company of the 52nd Aviation Battalion of the 1st Aviation Brigade, had the responsibility to provide aviation support for the mission. The planning session took place, as it nearly always did, at F.O.B. II located on the outskirts of Kontum City, the provincial capital of Kontum Province in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Forward Operating Base II (later referred to as CCC, Command and Control Central) was the home base for the Army’s 5th Special Forces in the Central Highlands and the base of operations for the teams made up of U.S. and indigenous soldiers that operated secret missions inside North Vietnamese controlled Laos.

Those soldiers were the best of the best that I encountered in Vietnam. Nearly all of their missions were conducted “across the fence” in Laos or Cambodia, where they surveilled and disrupted enemy activity in enemy base areas and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were highly skilled and incredibly courageous.

We would stage out of DakTo, a remote airfield defended by a brigade of the 4th Division that served as the normal jumping off point for these secret missions. The FAC (Forward Air

Controller) would be an Air Force "Covey" pilot accompanied by an experienced Special Forces liaison and flying a push-pull Cessna. A pair of A1E's flying out of Pleiku would provide fixed wing coverage, while a pair of AH-1 "Pink Panther" Cobras from the 361st Assault Weapons Company out of Pleiku would provide gunship cover. The actual extraction of the 8 man team on the ground would be performed by a pair of 57th Gladiator UH-1H "Hueys" while 2 additional Hueys orbited at altitude and observed from a distance, there just in case something went wrong.

I had been flying the UH1H on these missions for some time, graduating from pilot to aircraft commander, from chase ship pilot to insertion and extraction pilot, until I had assumed flight lead status. Members of the unit rotated on the FOB mission, and on the days that I flew it, I most often flew as flight leader, first in the LZ (landing zone) or to drop the McGuire rig. That would not be the case on this mission. We rarely were so certain that a mission would be relatively uneventful (a conclusion drawn from scant information and the knowledge that we were not responding to a "prairie fire", Special Forces code for May Day), so we would give less experienced pilots a chance at performing the extraction and I would orbit above and at a distance as Aircraft Commander of one of the chase ships. My crew would consist of an experienced crew chief, Specialist John Lindsay, Co-Pilot John Howard White who had been in-country for a short time, and a less experienced gunner both there to gain experience on the mission.

Initially, all went as planned. We departed DakTo as a group with the pair of Pink Panther Cobra gunships leading the slicks (our jargon describing the troop-carrying Hueys); I was flying in 3rd position as the first of 2 Huey chase ships. Our formations were loose affairs with different altitudes, intervals and flightpaths used by all, a tactic learned by the unit over time. The jungle provided good cover for us during these transits, made more safely when one did not follow the other over the same spot allowing an enemy gunner to anticipate the trailing aircraft's arrival. We were joined by the Air Force "Spads" in their propeller driven A1Es as we crossed the border into Laos and began taking instruction from the FAC in the Covey who would direct the gunships to the LZ while the slicks staged at a distance.

This part of Laos was completely controlled by the NVA. The famed Ho Chi Minh Trail was so well developed in the otherwise remote, isolated and undeveloped area that it was paved in some sections. The enemy, of whom there were tens of thousands present in the area, had become familiar with our methods and had developed the ability to rapidly respond to our incursions, even assigning watchers to monitor potential LZs and deploying anti-aircraft weaponry to protect their supply routes and encampments. As a result, we knew that every mission had the potential to turn into a life and death struggle at a moment's notice, and they often did. We had the advantage of airpower and airmobility and they had the cover of the

jungle, familiarity with the territory and long-planned reactive strategies on their side. Each of these opposing strengths would come into play during this mission.

At the FAC's direction, the gunships approached and located the LZ where they established the classic racetrack pattern that allowed each ship to, in turn, direct its firepower toward the surrounds of the LZ while his trailing partner gave him cover from the rear. I watched from a distance as the first slick then approached the landing zone (a small clearing amongst tall jungle trees) and hovered down to the jungle floor. In minutes he was coming out of the LZ and turning east toward the border. The second ship timed his approach nearly perfectly so that his descent into the LZ began only seconds after the first ships departure.

I began to relax. I'd heard no call indicating enemy fire being received, the first ship was clear and the second ship was reappearing above the jungle canopy and transitioning to forward flight.

Then, for what seemed to be no obvious reason, the second ship crashed into the trees and settled into the jungle. It seemed surreal. I heard "He's down!" from one of the gunship pilots and felt the adrenalin surge as I headed for the crash site. We nearly immediately heard by radio from one of the team members on board that they were off the ship and while there were injuries, everyone seemed to be mobile, a remarkable fact considering that they had just crashed into triple canopy jungle populated with trees that were between 125' and 150' tall.

After confirming everyone's mobility, the FAC directed the downed team and airmen to walk several hundred yards north northeast to an area of elephant grass that was clear enough for our chase aircraft to approach. At about the same time the team reported receiving fire from the south. I waited with the other chase ship east of all of this while the downed men moved to the designated pickup point, which had been quickly chosen after an analysis of the surrounding terrain and conversation between the FAC and me in my role as AC of the first chase (now recovery) ship. The gunships established their racetrack south of the LZ and started laying down covering fire to counter the weapons fire being received by our men.

As soon as the downed men reached the landing area, we moved in to pick them up, hovering into, flattening, and chopping down the elephant grass (10 or likely more feet high) with our rotor blade so that we could get low enough to load them. The grassy area had the additional difficulty of hidden and broken bamboo stumps with the potential to pierce our fuel tank located in the belly of the ship. It was a challenge that demanded coordination of all our crewmembers to get us low enough to load while avoiding the disabling bamboo stumps. Despite the difficulties, we soon had everyone on board and both chase ships lifted off heading east toward the border and safety. I remember the elation.

As we climbed out the gunships broke off their racetrack and headed east as well. I had 4 of the 8 men who had gone down and radioed the other chase ship to verify that we had them all. The answer to my question changed everything.

I believe that Warrant Officer Michael Mobley was flying the other chase ship. He replied, saying that he had 3 of the downed men on board. I had 4. That meant someone was still back at the crash site. A feeling of dread crept up my spine. We determined that Specialist John Grimaldi, the door gunner of the ship that had gone down, was the missing man.

There was no question about what would come next; we would do everything possible to recover our missing crewman. This was Laos, our mission was secret, and the only assets available to help would be those sworn to keep it so. Grimaldi, an American soldier, one of us, was down there alone in the enemy's back yard and we would move heaven and earth to get him back.

I radioed the gunships, asking them to return to the crash site as we proceeded to the super-secret Special Forces outpost in Laos, known as Leghorn, where we landed on its small helicopter pad and unloaded our passengers. Leghorn was located on a nearly unapproachable mountain pinnacle where the outpost served as an emergency landing place for the helicopters and a radio relay facility for the teams in the field. It was serving both purposes that day.

From there we flew back to the jungle crash site and commenced a search for Grimaldi. I hovered the Huey right in the treetops and did my best to maneuver in such a way that we could see the jungle floor. We began at the crash site and hovered slowly around the area in an ever widening circle until we had moved some distance from our starting point. We took fire from NVA soldiers on the south side of the crash site and requested covering fire from the gunships. They complied and laid down withering minigun fire while we used the huge jungle trees for cover. We searched and searched and were beginning to run low on fuel having found no sign of Grimaldi.

When it became apparent that our fuel reserves would soon approach the minimum required to allow safe return to Dak To, I made the decision to make a final pass directly over the downed aircraft before breaking off the search and heading back for fuel. I remember the breath-taking moment when on that final pass we found Grimaldi lying beside the aircraft. We were all elated and stunned. How had he gotten there? Was he alive? He laid there motionless. I lowered our Huey into the canopy in an attempt to get down to the aircraft and Grimaldi, but there just wasn't clearance enough amongst the trees and we again received fire from enemy gunners. Someone was going to have to carry him to the elephant grass LZ or we would have to lift him out using a McGuire rig. That meant a return to Dak To for fuel and a Bright Light team.

Word spread quickly as the nature of our dilemma was radioed back to Dak To and our Operations in Kontum. When we arrived back in Dak To, we were met by a heavy fire team of 57th AHC Cougar gunships and additional 57th Gladiator slicks that were needed to carry the Bright Light team to the rescue site. A plan was developed; three Gladiator helicopters would drop the rescue team in the same grassy area that we had used to extract the downed crew and team members. Having delivered my part of the team, I would then hover over the downed ship so the team could use the sound of the rotors coming from our aircraft as a point of reference that would lead them to the crash site. The gunships would suppress enemy fire. When the team had secured the site and determined Grimaldi's condition, they would determine whether it would be necessary for them to carry him back to the LZ or we would take him out by McGuire rig.

A heavy fire team of gunships consisted of 3 UH1-C gunships equipped with the rapid-firing electrically driven "mini-guns" capable of firing at up to 4,000 rounds per minute and high explosive rockets that delivered the explosive power of an artillery shell to a target. A standard gunship team consisted of 2 of these ships. Under circumstances of extreme threat, a "heavy" team of three was used. Such gunships were devastating offensive weapons that were most often used to protect the "slicks" on these operations.

A Bright Light team consisted of Special Forces soldiers whose assignment required them to be on standby at Dak To as a ready rescue force able to be inserted when a team was in trouble, an aircraft was down, or a POW was spotted in the enemy controlled environs of Laos or Cambodia. They were heavily armed, highly trained and fearsome soldiers.

A McGuire rig is a simple construct made up of 4 ropes that are approximately 150 feet in length and equipped with a device that can be attached to a harness worn by the man on the ground. Depending on need one or two of the ropes are dropped out each side of a hovering aircraft through to the jungle floor. Once the soldiers being extracted are safely attached, the helicopter above the jungle canopy lifts them by hovering straight up until the soldiers clear the trees. This maneuver requires interaction amongst a highly skilled and experienced crew who must guide the pilot to safe clearance as the suspended men come up through and eventually clear the trees. A rope tangled in a tree would lead to a tragic result: the death or injury of its passenger(s) and/or the destruction of the helicopter. Crewmen carried knives that would be used to cut the rope and save the ship and crew in that circumstance. Additionally, as they slowly made the initial purely vertical lift, the ships and men performing this type of extremely dangerous extraction are vulnerable to enemy fire as they hang motionless and exposed over 150 feet above the jungle floor.

As a result, this mission would require an experienced and battle-hardened crew that could face the enemy and keep their cool. We all wanted to have the best chance possible to save

Grimaldi and survive the experience. The inexperienced co-pilot and gunner who had been with me on the "routine" mission were replaced by Lieutenant Jim McKenzie and Specialist Richard Kleint, a decision that would later prove to be critical to our successful completion of the mission. McKenzie was himself an experienced pilot who I had flown with on many missions. He had proved to be a bright, resourceful and skilled pilot and leader who kept his cool in tough situations. Kleint was a strapping young crew chief who inspired me with his courage and competence every time I flew with him. John Lindsay was a determined and courageous crew chief as well. We had the right crew for the mission as we lifted off with a full load of fuel determined to save our compatriot.

The flight back to the LZ was uneventful. Radio chatter was minimal as we all contemplated the mission at hand. We were flying into an enemy controlled area deep in Laos where the NVA lay in wait for us and the life of our friend and crewmate hung in the balance. The Cougar gunships led the way and set up the racetrack. They immediately received and returned fire. Various types of anti-aircraft and small arms fire were now part of the threat. The fight was underway. Our Gladiator slicks dropped into the LZ, hovering into the elephant grass above the dangerous bamboo stumps while the Bright light team unloaded and gathered there.

I then hovered our aircraft from the LZ to the crash site in order to provide an audible guide to the slowly advancing team. When we arrived at our station atop the jungle canopy 150 feet above the crash site, we spotted Grimaldi still lying beside the ship. Then events began to unfold in rapid succession. We began receiving enemy gunfire and saw enemy soldiers moving just yards away from the crash site. I moved the ship behind the cover of the jungle canopy and made a call to our escorting Cougars whose miniguns scattered the waiting enemy and slowed down the NVA's rate of fire. At the same time we alerted the approaching team, letting them know of the presence of the enemy soldiers.

We were on the horns of a dilemma. The team had not arrived and the enemy was directly outside the crash site in position to capture or kill Grimaldi. With the advice of the crew, I made a decision. With the help of guidance provided by our more experienced crew, we would attempt to lower our helicopter into the LZ, chopping limbs with our rotors if necessary, in an effort to get to Grimaldi before NVA soldiers did. I asked for covering fire from the Cougars and Spads and moved into position. We could hear the bullets popping around us as we began the descent, chopping the light limbs on our way down. But it was no use; we could not risk the helicopter and crew trying to cut through the canopy, it was simply too thick. I hovered back up to the top of the canopy where we sat like a mother hen watching over Grimaldi while Kleint and Lindsay leveled their M60 machine-guns firing at anyone who moved near the clearing made by the downed aircraft.

It seemed like a very long time, marked by the regular passage of enemy bullets heading our way, before the Bright Light team appeared. The team soon secured the LZ and determined that Grimaldi should be lifted out by McGuire rig. Kleint and Lindsay dropped the ropes and a team member fastened the special harness designed for that purpose around Grimaldi's torso. Soon three soldiers from the team and Grimaldi were attached to the ropes and we began the ascent. As noted earlier, there is no hoisting device attached to the ropes. Rather, the pilot, taking direction from the crew must hover straight up until the long ropes completely clear the jungle. This causes the ship to lose the cover provided by the triple canopy and increases the enemies' chance of getting a visual sighting and clear line of fire. The gunships were really working out now, firing constantly in an attempt to disengage the enemy and protect us during our ascent.

We cleared the trees safely. Our experienced crew kept their cool under fire and safely directed me, allowing us to raise the dangling men clear of the jungle. Now we had to fly to the elephant grass area where we would lower and recover our precious cargo. This part of the flight was our most vulnerable. It required slow and precise flying with everyone's lives at stake, while the gunships and Spads gave everything they had to give us a chance to survive.

The crew directed me to a landing spot in the oft-visited elephant grass, calling out altitude and position directions as I made the descent that would put Grimaldi and the team down in the LZ where we could load our injured fellow Gladiator. They called out when our living cargo touched down and proceeded to direct me in descent to a place safely clear of them. Of course I couldn't touch down because of the problem with the bamboo that threatened our fuel tank, so I descended to a hover just above the jagged bamboo stumps. It seemed almost over. Of course, it was not.

We had taken 3 team members out with Grimaldi in the hope that they could help load him once we reached the LZ. Two of them were on the left side of the aircraft and the other was down near Grimaldi about 50 feet from our right side. What was immediately apparent was that the men on the left were struggling to get through the elephant grass to the men on the right while precious time of high vulnerability for us ticked away keeping Grimaldi from the treatment he needed for his wounds. To compound our problem even further, a Vietnamese Air Force CH-34 "King Bee" arrived at that moment hovering in our left rear quadrant about 30 feet above us. The CH-34 carried a Special Forces medic who had the good intention of tending to the injured and wounded Grimaldi. Rotor wash from the larger CH-34 King Bee was causing the Huey to be right at the edge of control as I tried to maintain a hover and avoid piercing our fuel tank on the jagged stumps below us.

The radios on the CH-34 were notorious among Huey pilots because of the garbling that occurred when we attempted to communicate with them. As a result, the King Bee pilot could

not understand my increasingly desperate attempts to communicate the situation to him, nor could I understand his transmissions. Therefore, he remained unaware of the treacherous conditions that we were facing in the LZ.

Finally, in a last attempt to avert disaster, I shouted to John Lindsay over the intercom, saying "He can't understand me, wave him away!" Lindsay frantically waved at the intruding ship while I struggled at the controls and monitored Grimaldi's status.

In the middle of all this Rich Kleint and I came to the conclusion that Rich would have to get off the buffeting aircraft and make his way through the elephant grass to help the soldier on the right side of the aircraft carry and load the unconscious Grimaldi. Rich jumped off the aircraft at about the same time that John Lindsay attempted to point his M60 at the culprit hovering above us who was unwittingly about to force us from the air and on to the dangerous bamboo. When Lindsay realized that his gun mount would not allow him to raise the machine gun barrel high enough to threaten the 34, he picked up his M16 and pointed it directly at the pilot.

That, as they say, did the job. The King Bee pilot got the nonverbal message and lifted off eliminating the destabilizing rotor wash as he departed.

With the aircraft now fully under control, I watched as Rich Kleint approached carrying Grimaldi. When he reached our helicopter, I soon realized that he could not hoist his precious human cargo high enough to get him in. So, with John Lindsay's guidance, I lowered the ship until it was just touching the jagged bamboo. With Lindsay's help, Kleint then managed to hoist Grimaldi on board. Rich then climbed aboard and we finally lifted off, heading east for Dak To.

After hours of facing down an enemy in his own territory, we had our Gladiator back. He was badly injured, in and (mostly) out of consciousness and in need of medical attention, but he was aboard and we were heading out of Laos. While the rest of the Cougars, Gladiators, Spads and the Covey remained to extract the heroic rescuing Bright Light team, we flew toward safety as fast as the Huey would go. When we finally landed at Dak To, we landed right beside the small medical dispensary that served the troops there. It was the softest landing I ever made in any aircraft. Grimaldi was quickly unloaded and taken inside; we hovered to the revetment area, parked and shut down. The Huey was nearly out of fuel.

We soon learned that Grimaldi was stable and would be flown to the Military Hospital in Pleiku for emergency treatment.

1st Lieutenant Jim McKenzie had maintained absolute composure while he assisted and advised me well during one of the most difficult successful missions performed during my time as a combat pilot. Specialists Kleint and Lindsay had proven to be resourceful and fearless in the

face of near constant enemy fire. We had all done what was necessary to bring our Gladiator safely home.

Sometime later I had conversation with a member of the rescuing Bright Light Team, who told me of his belief that the NVA had dragged Grimaldi to the downed ship with the intention of using him as bait for a trap. He believed that only the devastating firepower delivered by the gunships and A1's had foiled their plan. Additionally, he told me that the Bright Light team had wired the downed Huey with explosives. Then, as they withdrew he observed the enemy moving in on the helicopter which was then blown up "in the faces" of the NVA soldiers.

All in all it was a remarkable event carried out over a four hour period by a team of courageous and dedicated men that once again proved the strength of the American military's ethic of "leave no one behind".

Charles H. Nesbitt

A [related news story](#) can be found here.