

# The Rescue of Hammer 51

*Two lives, an incredible series of random interactions, and a life lesson*

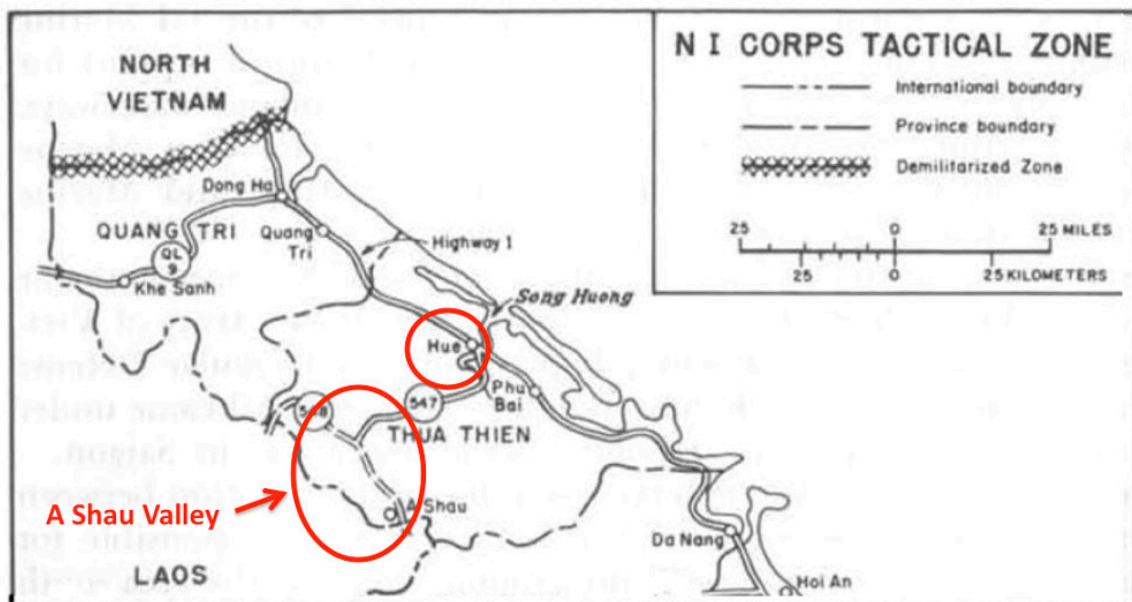


558 TFS mate to incident aircraft: F-4C 64-0767

by Brigadier General Thomas D. Pilsch, USAF (Ret)

When a Vietnam veteran starts a conversation with a contemporary and they begin to recognize a common link of service in Southeast Asia, it isn't long before the question is asked, "Where were you?" The response to such an exchange over lunch in 1989 reopened memories of a life or death struggle 20 years earlier in South Vietnam's A Shau Valley and provided an unanticipated appreciation for the impact that chance encounters can have on our lives.

My "Where?" in Vietnam was Hue in northern I Corps.



Basic I Corps Tactical Zone Map: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1975

In early 1969 I was on the downhill side of my one year tour as an Air Force forward air controller (FAC), probably the best job a young pilot could have in Vietnam. I was assigned as a Thua Thien sector FAC with the primary responsibility to work with US and Australian advisors to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces operating in the province. I also supported ARVN operations in Quang Tri province to the north as well as other air operations such as Ranch Hand spray missions and the interdiction of North Vietnamese supply lines, particularly in the A Shau Valley. This broad spectrum of responsibility in one of the most active military regions of Vietnam in 1968 and 1969 provided great flying experience as well as valuable insight into the war effort.

I was flying the Cessna O-2A *Skymaster*. These aircraft started to arrive in-country in late 1967 to supplement the venerable O-1 *Bird Dog* in the FAC mission as US forces were continuing to build up. The O-1 was felt by many to be the ideal FAC airplane: great visibility from either side and good short field capability to work with troops in the field, and I could not disagree with these strengths. The twin engine design of the O-2 would seemed to have been a blessing when flying in combat, but a heavy suite of radios and navigation equipment (an operational plus) and a full load of rockets (14 for the *Skymaster* vice four for the *Bird Dog*) made for an underpowered aircraft in the hot, humid conditions of Vietnam. The story was that the only difference between the O-1 and the O-2 if you lost an engine was that the O-2 gave you a larger area from which to select a crash site.



Author with O-2A at Tay Loc/Hue Citadel airfield, August 1968

We initially flew from Tay Loc Airfield inside the Citadel at Hue and close to our quarters in the MACV compound on the south side of the Perfume River. 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force, the command agency for all USAF assets in Vietnam, had a minimum runway requirement of 3,000 ft. for O-2A operations, but they granted a waiver for our detachment to use Hue Citadel's 2,400 ft. runway. This proved to have been a bad decision in September 1968 when one of our most experienced pilots ran an airplane off a wet runway. No one was hurt and the airplane was not seriously damaged, but we had to move our flying operation south to Phu Bai, forcing us to make tense 9 mile first-light drives down Highway 1 for

early takeoffs, always with the hope that the Army engineers had completed their sweep for mines.

With all its seeming disadvantages, especially its side-by-side seating, anemic power and no open window on the pilot's side, I liked the O-2. In our area of operations in northern I Corps, we spent a lot of time over the mountains and a long way from friendly bases. There was something comforting about the second engine and the *Skymaster* gave us a lot of time on station. I had several missions over four hours, and the large supply of marking rockets allowed us to remain in the fight while directing multiple sets of fighters during troops in contact situations. The best part about the O-2 was that it got me home every time.

In the last week of January 1969 my detachment at Hue was tasked to participate in a major bombing effort against targets in the A Shau Valley in preparation for a U.S. ground campaign into the area that history would identify as Operations *Dewey Canyon*, *Massachusetts Striker* and *Apache Snow*.

We were conducting air strikes every day and had FACs over the Valley almost constantly during daylight hours.

Around mid-morning on January 24th I was en route to the Valley to relieve another FAC, Speedy 11 from Da Nang. I was listening to him work a pair of F-4s from Cam Ranh Bay, Hammer 51 & 52, when I heard a call from the leader as he pulled up from a bomb run:

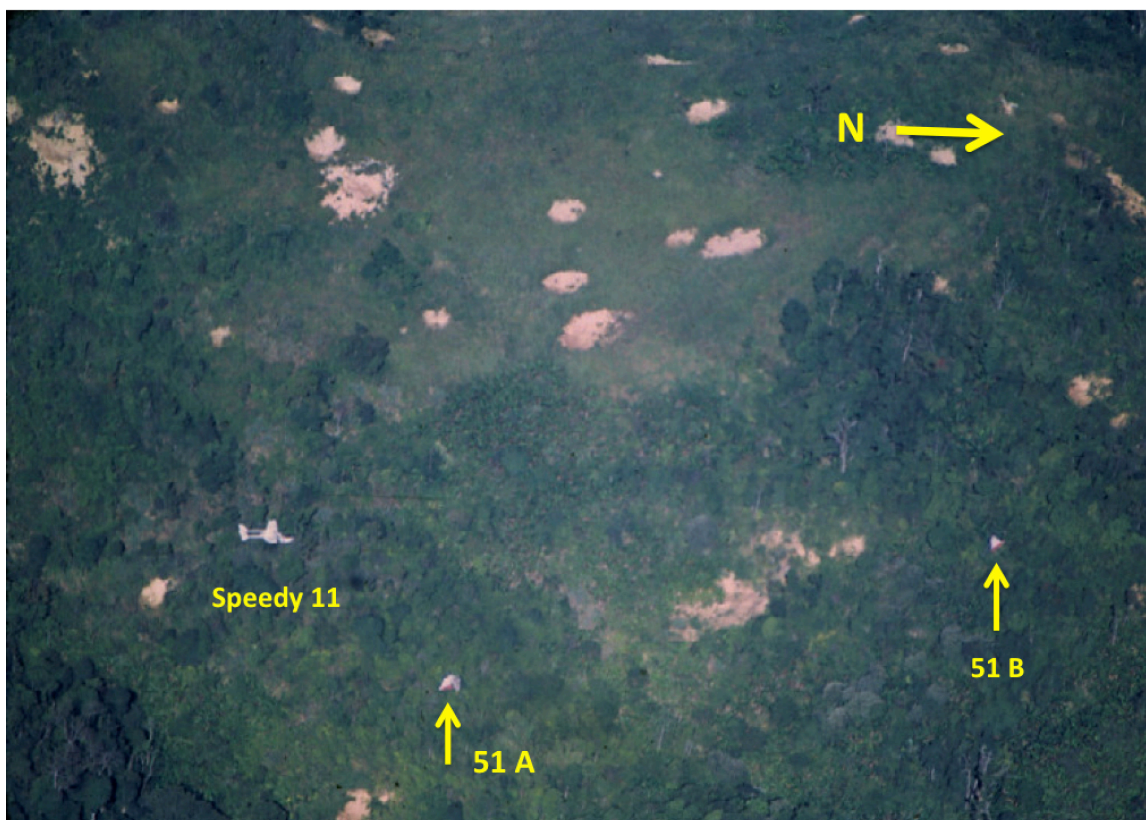
"We've got a fire light!" \* quickly followed by a more urgent,  
"We've got two fire lights! We've got two fire lights! We're bailing out.  
Mayday! Mayday! Hammer 51!" \* (engine fire warning light)

This was not going to be a routine day for anyone.

By the time I arrived over the scene, I could see the smoke rising from the jungle to mark where the jet had impacted. There was nothing left of the aircraft, and if it had not been for the smoke I would not have been able to location the crash site.







Speedy 11 over the two survivors (Hammer 51 A & B). Based on the direction of Hammer 51's flight (right to left) and the characteristics of the F-4 escape system (rear seat goes first), the aircraft commander is at A and the rear seat pilot is at B. (Photo by the author)

The two survivors were on the ground (or, rather, in the trees) about 100 meters apart and maybe five kilometers north of the crash site. They were located in the hills on the east side of the A Shau Valley near the abandoned A Luoi airfield. This was not a friendly area as we had been tracking increasing enemy activity during the previous weeks.

Speedy 11 was orbiting over the survivors to make radio contact and assure them that help was on the way. When he approached his bingo fuel, he briefed me on the situation and then headed for home.

I established radio contact with the two survivors, Hammer 51A (front seater) and Hammer 51B (GIB: guy in back). I also made lots of low passes over the area to let them know that somebody was there. I took care not to pass too close so as not to tip off the unfriendlies as to their location. The center of my pattern was several kilometers north, closer to the original target.



CSAR Team: A-1H *Skyraiders* & HH-3E *Jolly Green Giant*

After about 30 minutes I was contacted by Sandy 01, the CSAR (combat search & rescue) task force commander flying an A-1 *Skyraider* en route from Danang. I talked them into my location and pointed out the survivors (their chutes were very visible against the jungle canopy).

He acknowledged the briefing and assumed on-scene command. I exited stage west but remained on frequency to monitor the situation and orbited over the A Luoi airfield, about three kilometers west, to watch the show.

I saw a very professional performance, indeed ... those *Sandys* were good! The leader worked his wingman in with several sets of fighters to "sanitize" the pickup area before bringing in the *Jolly Green* chopper. He marked his targets carefully with Willie Pete (WP or white phosphorus) rockets so that the ordnance would not be too close to the survivors.

As it was, the first bomb that went off up the hill brought a high pitched radio call from one of the guys on the ground who wasn't expecting it. I couldn't blame him.

I knew when the CBU's (cluster bomb units) were dropped that the final act was about to begin. These were hand grenade-sized antipersonnel submunitions used to suppress Triple-A (anti-aircraft artillery). These weapons spread shrapnel over a large area and were effective for keeping gunner's heads down.

Care had to be taken that the survivors were hugging the ground when CBU's were used, but at this point they likely were so glad to see the drama unfolding that they willingly complied.

Before the smoke could clear away, the HH-3 *Jolly Green Giant* helicopter was moving in for the first pickup. At the direction of Sandy 01, the survivor popped a smoke flare which can be seen as a red cloud around the faint image of the helicopter. I apologize for the poor quality of the photos, but there was a lot of metal (friendly and unfriendly) flying over the pickup site, and it was no time for a tourist with a camera to get in the way.



Helicopter picking up Hammer 51A

I was amazed at how long the choppers had to maintain hover during the pickup. The jungle penetrator (seat device) had to be slowly lowered after the Jolly Green came to a hover. The survivor needed to locate the penetrator, open the seat and strap himself onto it. A PJ (Parajumper, a rescue specialist crewmember) sometimes rode the penetrator down if the survivor needed assistance. The hoist cable had to be rewound deliberately to avoid twisting and other stress to the steel cable. It seemed like a long time to an observer; it must have seemed like an eternity to the guys in the chopper who were hanging it all out, motionless, just above the trees. They had my respect.



PJ on Jungle Penetrator  
(Photo by author at NMUSAF)

At last two very happy survivors were safely on board, and the helicopters pulled off and headed back to Da Nang. The *Sandys* and the supporting fighter cover had some ordnance left over, and I directed four sets of fighters into the area where the deadly gunfire originated before I headed home. It was a long mission, 3 1/2 hours, but it had a good ending.

The next morning at first light I was back over the A Shau Valley. The two parachutes that had been snagged high in the tree tops were gone. Charlie had gotten himself some souvenirs. Better two slightly used parachutes than two American pilots.

Fast forward 20 years to the spring of 1989 in Newport, Rhode Island. I was assigned to the U.S. Forces Command joint staff at Fort McPherson in Atlanta and was attending an interagency drug interdiction conference at the Naval War College. At lunch I was sitting with another Air Force colonel, Dick Rybak, from the Atlantic Command staff. We were talking about our experience in the war, and I ask the question: "Where were you?" Dick said that he had flown F-4s out of Cam Ranh Bay. I remarked that I had been a FAC and worked with a lot of F-4s from the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing in the A Shau Valley. He gave me a strange look and very quietly said, "I was shot down over the A Shau Valley." After comparing notes, I told him that I thought I had been there and might have some pictures of the rescue.

After I got home, I dug through my old footlocker and came up with the slides and my logbook. There for January 24, 1969, was the entry:

"SAR for Hammer 51A & B in A Shau; both rescued.  
4 airstrikes on a/w\* position." [ \* automatic weapon]

I now had a name and a face to put against a log entry. Dick told me that the front seater (Hammer 51A) was then-Major Bob Russ. In 1983-5, now Lieutenant General Russ had been my second-level boss in the Pentagon, but we had never made this connection.

At the time of my meeting with Dick Rybak in 1989, General Russ was the commander of the U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Command at Langley AFB, Virginia. I was working for General Colin Powell as his Deputy Chief of Staff at Forces Command and, by coincidence, General Powell was preparing to attend a conference with General Russ on joint air rescue doctrine. I told General Powell about the rescue of Hammer 51 and showed him the slides I had taken. He took them and a script I had prepared with him to the conference.

At an appropriate point Gen. Powell had the slides projected on the screen and told the story of how a future four-star general was plucked from the jaws of fate by a coordinated air rescue effort. General Powell told me later that General Russ got very quiet when he saw the pictures and relived what must have been a significant emotional event in his life.



Gen Robert D. Russ

Dick Rybak later added these comments on his experience:

"It was a clear day and during our preflight intelligence brief it was strongly emphasized that if we were hit and had to bail out, our chances for survival were greatly enhanced if we could make it over the eastern ridge of the A Shau Valley. After being hit we tried but the Phantom was in flames and there was no way we could have made it. So out we went. I believe the ejection was at about 2,000 ft.

"Smooth ejection and I checked everything in my survival vest (especially my radio) on the way down. Couldn't believe the carpet of jungle awaiting me as I approached the trees. Survival training kicked in, and I remembered to cross my legs before hitting the triple jungle canopy. I did cross my ankles as I hit the trees and closed my eyes as I started bouncing through the jungle. When I finally stopped I was upside down about 3' from the ground.

"I couldn't believe the total silence. Unclipped from my harness, I made a radio call, drank my flask of water which we were told to do to prevent combat shock, checked the bullets in my trusty 38 (what a joke), and stood around waiting for something to happen.

"Told to remain under the chute, I was also told that the two of us landed on either side of a small gorge and that the ridges above us and the valley between us would be bombed before the Jolly Greens could attempt a rescue. That's when I discovered that bombs don't whistle. I would hear (jungle was too dense to see) a plane screaming overhead (yes I love jet noise), then nothing...complete silence. Seconds later the entire jungle would explode as the dropped bombs exploded. Following that, dirt would rain down upon us. Not certain how long the bombing lasted, but it was obviously both welcome and effective.

"Long periods of silence made me extremely anxious (scared to death) as I was certain the NVA were coming and were getting close. When the Jolly Green arrived I believe I was rescued second (probably due to rank). I let the jungle penetrator hit the ground and then quickly mounted one of the seats. Damned if I could get the strap around me and clipped so I wound it around my neck and gave a thumbs up to the copter. Amazing that with the jungle so dense that the prop wash from the copter flattened the trees enough that I could see the guys in the copter clearly.

"We didn't speak on the way to Danang, and when we arrived the helicopter landed on the flight line, let us off and departed. So there the two of us stood. No welcoming committee or personnel of any sort to greet us. We gathered up our stuff and walked down the C-130 line asking if anyone was headed to Cam Ranh Bay. No problem catching a ride (things were pretty loose back then) and off we went. Arriving at Cam Ranh we went directly to the "Hammer Inn," our squadron (558th TFS) watering place.



The guys could absolutely not believe we had been shot down, rescued and were about to have a beer, all in one fateful afternoon.

“We both suffered cuts, bruised & scratches but nothing to prevent us from flying. We didn't know that we were supposed to have an intelligence briefing and physical before flying again. All I really needed was a new helmet.”

Somewhere in the shock and excitement of being delivered from the jaws of death onto the flight line at Danang, a photo was taken of the survivors and crew of the Jolly Green, something of an Air Rescue Service tradition after a successful mission. Dick had not seen that photo, but the pilot of the chopper, Jim Grady, saw my Web page on the incident and sent this picture:



Front row, L-R: Maj. Don P. Olsen (AC); unkn (FE Edgar W. Hooper?); 1Lt Richard Rybak (51B); James H. Grady (P); Maj. Robert Russ, (51A); Sandy pilot (unkn); Sandy pilot: [Tom Biele](#)  
Right side of door: PJ Robert H. Fields (rank?) USAF photo provided by James Grady

Dick and I have kept in touch over the years, but perhaps the best contact came in 2003 in this note from his son:

“Mr. Pilsch,

I was a year and 10 days old the day you rescued my father in Vietnam. Thank you for your efforts, and for your service. My dad told me the story last night, and emailed me the link to your website this morning. Amazing.

Thank you again. I cannot imagine my life without my father. I've done everything from skydiving, to racing Grand Prix motorcycles, to rock climbing -- all because of the way my Dad brought me up. I have never heard the story of that day, and your site fulfilled the wonder that I've had.

Thank you again. I hope your future is crammed full of health, happiness and prosperity.

Jeff Rybak  
(Dick Rybak's oldest son)”

I replied, thanking him for this heartwarming message but acknowledging that the real heroes of that day were the helicopter crewmen who hovered for what seemed an eternity in enemy territory over his father and General Russ to bring them safely home.

Jeff's message summarized the significance of this incident half a century ago: our daily random encounters may have consequences beyond anything we can imagine – in this case a father lived to influence another generation, a man was able to complete an impactful career of service to our country -- but the most important and lasting lesson is never to underestimate the potential significance of any chance encounter.

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BG (Ret) Tom Pilsch retired in 1994 after over 29 years on active duty. He is a command pilot with over 4,000 hours of flying time and more than 300 combat missions in the O-2A Skymaster as a forward air controller at Hué, RVN, 1968-1969. In 1994 Gen. Pilsch began a second career in education, first at Auburn University and then Georgia Tech as a professor of the practice of national security at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs. Retired since 2015, he now lives in Bryan, Texas. A previous article, *Mission to Mafraq*, was published in the Summer 2017 issue of the *Friends Journal*.