

# 1966

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1966

By 1966, U.S. strength had grown to 385,000 personnel, bolstered by additional forces from South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Viet Cong successes were greatly diminished and their only significant victory was in March when their forces overran a Special Forces camp in the A Shau Valley. Because of heavy Viet Cong losses during the year, it was estimated that North Vietnam had to commit more than 58,000 of its regular troops to assume a greater share of the conflict. On Dec. 24, 1965, President Johnson declared a bombing halt over North Vietnam to try to persuade Hanoi to discuss a political settlement. It lasted until Jan. 30, 1966. Hanoi used the time to rebuild its strength, repair previous damage, and send more troops and supplies southward. So, Rolling Thunder began again and U.S. aircrews not only had to attack the new targets, but also those they had already destroyed which had been rebuilt or repaired.

8 Jan 66

On 8 January 1966 a major change occurred with a reorganization of the entire Air Rescue Service. The changes entailed a new mission of spacecraft recovery. Most noticeable was a new name; the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS). Another change was a complete reorganization of combat rescue units in Southeast Asia.

3 ARRGp activated at Tan Son Nhut AB. In order to establish more effective command and control over numerous helicopter detachments, fixed wing detachments, the Joint Services Air Rescue Coordinating Center (JSARCC) and its subordinate Rescue Coordination Centers (RCC) a decision was made to reconstitute SAR forces into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group. Its area of responsibility was Southeast Asia. The group was activated on \* Jan 66 with Col. Arthur W. Beall assuming command. The JSARCC is directly under the 3<sup>rd</sup> ARRGp. The RCC's at DaNang and Udorn became Det. 1 and Det. 2 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> ARRGp respectively, while the fixed wing aircraft were organized into the 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS. The 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS was activated on 8 Jan 66 at DaNang AB, with 6 TDY HU-16's. Det. 1, 37 ARRS activated at Udorn AB, with 2 HC-130E's. All helicopters were assigned to the 38<sup>th</sup> ARS. P.27-28#1

18 Jan 66

Det. 8, 38 ARS activated at Can Ranh Bay. 2 HH-43's.

Det 11, 38 ARS activated at Tuy Hoa. HH-43's.

Feb 66

602<sup>nd</sup> Air Commando Squadron moved its A-1E operations from Bien Hoa to Udorn, with SAR RESCORT as one of its primary missions.

19 Feb 66

F-105 SAR Mu Gia Pass p53#1

9 March 66

Spooky 70 SAR. AC-47 downed in A Chau Valley. Initially 5 survivors. Two killed in ground combat with enemy trying to capture them. These survivors fought to make their rescue possible. 3 rescued by HH-43.

*See Spooky 70 folder try and find in 38 ARRS history*

14 March 1966

It was late in the afternoon of 14 March 1966. An HU-16B "Albatross" call sign "Crown Bravo" was on SAR orbit over the Gulf of Tonkin, some two hundred miles north of the DMZ. SAR aircraft were at this orbit position anytime fighter bombers were striking targets in North Vietnam. SAR orbits consisted of flying racetrack patterns ten miles or so offshore. These locations were safe from North Vietnamese attacks but close enough to the action that the rescue crew could get to a downed pilot in a hurry. This aircraft and its crew are assigned PCS to the 33 ARRS, Naha AB, Okinawa, but are presently TDY to DaNang Air Base. Its crew consists of Captain David Westenbarger, pilot/rescue crew commander; Lt Walter Hall, co-pilot; Captain Donald Price, navigator; SSgt Clyde Jackson, flight engineer; A1C Robert Hilton, radio operator; and A1C James Pleiman, pararescueman. The HU-16 is an amphibian, designed to land on either runways or water. This made it an ideal platform to recover downed airmen from coastal waters off of North Vietnam. The "Albatross" was also equipped to function as a radio relay station during rescue operations. It provided airborne command and control for rescue missions involving multiple aircraft. The "Albatross" could stay airborne for up to 16 hours and cruise at 140 knots. These SAR orbits were known to the crews as DUCKBUTT's. The TDY HU-16's at DaNang had gotten into a flying schedule routine. On most days there would be a "DUCKBUTT ALPHA" early morning SAR orbit, followed by a "DUCKBUTT BRAVO" afternoon SAR orbit. Everyone who has flown these orbits has at one time or another commented that they were primarily many hours of boredom. Most of these orbits were two box lunch missions. With little to do, the PJ would eat his box lunch, sometimes read and frequently take a nap to the lulling drone of the throttled back engines. The rest of the crew could keep busy flying, navigating, and monitoring radios.

On 14 March, the boredom of a normal DUCKBUTT would be punctuated by moments of terror and heroism. An F-4 manned by pilot Major James Peerson and his backseater, Captain Lynwood Bryant was attempting to get from their target in North Vietnam to the Gulf of Tonkin. Their F-4 had taken serious battle damage from AAA. They radioed that they would have to eject as soon as they were "feet wet" because their damaged fighter bomber was becoming increasingly difficult to control. The next radio call came from the battle damaged F-4's wingman. He radioed that Captain Peerson's crew had ejected at about 6000 feet, over the gulf, and he observed two good chutes. The wingman stated that he would stay overhead the now descending parachutists to provide SARCAP. Captain Westenbarger pushed his throttles on the HU-16 to full military power and raced to the area. The second radio call from the wingman of the downed F-4 made it clear that speed was needed. The wind had blown the descending parachutists very close to the shoreline. North Vietnamese sampans were near by and heading towards Major Peerson and Captain Bryant, now floating on the choppy ocean in their survival rafts. The North

Vietnamese wanted to capture these airmen and make them POW's. This would be a deadly contest between the North Vietnamese and SAR forces, to see who would get to the downed pilots first. When the HU-16 arrived on scene, Captain Westenbarger decides to conduct an open sea landing. Major Peerson is closest to the shore and in the greatest danger, so he would be the first recovered. After landing the "Albatross" is swift taxied as close as it can to Major Peerson. Just as pararescueman , Jim Pleiman dives into the water to help bring the injured survivor to the aircraft, communist gunners from the shoreline open fire with heavy weapons. SSgt Jackson went aft to help pull Pleiman and the downed pilot to the aircraft with a rope attached to the pararescueman. A1C Robert Hilton and Captain Price also moved to the rear to expedite the recovery. Airman Hilton had an M-16 and intended to fire at the approaching motorized sampans. The M-16 jammed and Captain price ordered Airman Hilton to give him the rifle and help Sergeant Jackson pull on the tag line connected to the two men in the water. As the two airmen pull on the rope, as fast as they can, Captain Price cleared the M-16 and began firing at the sampans. Just as the F-4 pilot is being pulled into the aircraft a 130mm howitzer round finds its mark and sets the "Albatross" ablaze. Simultaneously the sampans open fire on the now critically crippled HU-16. The HU-16 pilot and copilot, Captain Westenbarger and Lt. Hall, managed to escape the destroyed aircraft through a forward overhead hatch. Captain Price was thrown against a bulkhead. He was burned by the explosion, stunned and bleeding from multiple shrapnel wounds. Price saw Airman Hilton lying dead on the floor. Sergeant Jackson had been blown out the door into the water, was injured but still alive. Airman Pleiman, the PJ floated facedown dead in the water. Near his body, Major Peerson, injured and without a life jacket, struggled to keep his head above water. Still groggy and seriously injured, Captain Price egressed the aircraft and swam to aid Major Peerson. He towed Peerson away from the burning wreckage. Suddenly a Navy helicopter was hovering overhead and lowering a horse collar from its rescue hoist. The rotor wash whipped the surface of the ocean into a fine mist, making breathing and seeing difficult. Despite these new problems and his own injuries Captain Price helped Major Peerson into the horse collar. As the F-4 pilot was hauled aboard, artillery shells began impacting the area and sailors in the sampans fired away with small arms. The Navy chopper, took battle damage and was forced to pull out. The SARCAP of F-4's began suppressing the artillery fire by attacking the artillery sites. Several A-1's arrived in the area and began firing on the sampans that were attacking the SAR forces. A second Navy helicopter began to pick up the remaining survivors, unaware that Captain Price was still in the water. Captain Price suddenly found himself the lone living American floating in enemy waters. Nearby he observed an empty survival raft He swam to it and climbed in. About 400 yards out were several sampans, determined to capture at least one American. Fortunately for Price, one of the A-1's made a low pass over the SAR site prior to heading home and observed him in the life raft. He and the remaining A-1's and F-4's reentered a protective posture over the last American needing to be rescued. Each time the sampans attempted to move in on Captain Price, the fighters came down with guns blazing. Price recalled one sampan that was closing on him being cut in half by cannon fire. Many of the sampans were now destroyed. Those remaining in the area were hesitant to move in on Captain Price for fear of their lives. Fate was still conspiring against Captain Price, the tide was coming in and he was drifting toward shore. He climbed out of the raft into the water and swam out to sea, towing the raft. When he could swim no longer, pulled himself painfully back into the raft. He was in serious shock from his injuries and the strenuous swimming activities. The A-1's coordinated with the Navy to send out another helicopter. Finally a Navy UH-2B came in low and fast, hovered over the raft, and plucked him out of the Gulf.

14 March 1966 was a bad day for Air Rescue. We had lost two brave men, radio operator Robert Hilton and pararescueman James Pleiman in one of the most heavily contested SAR's to date. Airmen Hilton and Pleiman were the first men assigned to the Air Rescue Service confirmed as killed in action in Vietnam. We had HH-43's shot down prior to this SAR, but their crews were either rescued or captured and taken POW. This F-4 SAR had been an ordeal of heroism and endurance. All of the HU-16 crew was decorated for heroism. Captain Price was awarded the nation's second highest decoration for valor, the Air Force Cross.

After the war ended, in December 1988, the Vietnamese "discovered" the remains of Airman James E. Pleiman and returned them to U.S. control. Obviously they had recovered his remains in 1966. They held on to them, until the North Vietnamese government could ransom him back to the United States. Finally, the first pararescueman killed in the Vietnam War also became one of the last pararescueman to return home from Vietnam.

Apr 66

TDY HC-54's based out of Udorn phased out. TDY HC-130's from 79<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> ARS's take over mission.

*Add legacy of HU-16's p.20#2*

*Add HC-130 specifications p.21#2 p.76#7*

*Add HC-130 mission p.21-23#2*

8 Apr 66

Det 12, 38 ARS activated at Nha Trang. 1 HH-43B.

11 Apr 66

A1C William H. Pitsenbarger is in the final stretch of his tour in Vietnam. Twenty-one years old he has flown more than 300 sorties in the HH-43F, many of them under enemy fire. Bill had been awarded the Air Medal with five oak leaf clusters and four more were pending. Known as "Pitts" to his teammates, he was off the flying schedule on 11 April. Not having anything to do he was hanging around at Detachment 6, 38 ARRS, Bien Hoa. At 1500 a call came into operations for help. Elements of the Army's 1st Infantry Division were surrounded by enemy forces near Cam My, a few miles east of Saigon. They were trapped in thick jungle with the trees reaching up over a hundred feet. The only way to get the wounded soldiers out was with hoist equipped helicopters. Bill volunteered to crew a second Huskie that was being tasked for the mission. Everyone involved knew that this was likely to be a dangerous mission. Pedro pilot Capt. Dale Potter said, Pitsenbarger "was always willing to get into the thick of the action."

Half an hour later, three HH-43F rescue helicopters arrived on scene. Bill is on one of them, call sign "Pedro 73." Because the wounded soldiers would have to be recovered by stokes litter, he volunteers to ride the penetrator down into the battle below. He knew that the fastest way to recover multiple stokes litter recoveries was to load the litter himself. We had learned the hard way that sending a stokes down without a PJ was an invitation to disaster. Untrained personnel did not know how to secure patients in the litter. This resulted in long hover times, frequently under enemy fire. On rare occasions, while hoisting the litter back up a patient would fall out. Needless to say, falling 50 or more feet to the ground did not improve their medical condition. On more than one occasion untrained personnel sent the litter back up with one patient laying in it and a second one standing in it. For all these reasons, Bill went down into the jungle. He also knew that he could be treating the wounded soldiers while waiting for the litter to be lowered back down. When the Pedro only had room for one more man, the pilot told "Pitts" to get on the penetrator for the ride back into the safety of the helicopter. "Pitts" ordered the pilot to send the litter down again and take out one more of the wounded. While it may have been his duty to go down and recover wounded, it was certainly not expected that he should remain behind when his helicopter had to leave.

"Pitts" made the decision to remain with the soldiers in the jungle. He had to know that the situation was desperate. Wounded men were all around. Enemy small arms fire was periodically wounding even more men. Yet if he went back up on the hoist, the next HH-43 coming in would have to send down its PJ. This would increase the time needed to rescue the wounded soldiers. Besides, the men on the ground needed his help. In the next ninety minutes HH-43's came in five times, and Pitsenbarger loaded nine more wounded soldiers into a stokes litter for their ride to safety. On the sixth attempt, the hovering Huskie took heavy battle damage, was forced to cut the hoist cable and barely make it back to base. Intense enemy fire and friendly artillery called in by the Army made it impossible for any additional HH-43's to return. Army Sergeant Fred Navarro was one of the many stranded soldiers who provided the rest of the story. Heavy automatic weapons and mortar fire was coming in on the Army defenders from all sides.

Pitsenbarger continued to care for the wounded. In the midst of this firefight Bill climbed a tree to recover the stokes litter that his pilot had jettisoned. He needed it to move wounded soldiers when the C Company commander decided to move to another area. As they started to move out, the company was attacked by superior forces. By this time, the few Army troops able to return fire were running out of ammunition. Pitsenbarger gave his pistol to a soldier who was unable to hold a rifle. With complete disregard for his own safety, he scrambled around the defended area, collecting rifles and ammunition from the dead and distributing them to the men still able to fight.

About two hours after the HH-43's were driven off Bill Pitsenbarger lay down beside Sergeant Navarro and began returning fire at the enemy. It is now getting dark and it would be a long night. Throughout the night, while under constant enemy fire, Bill Pitsenbarger moves amongst the wounded, providing medical aid and redistributing weapons and ammunition to those too wounded to move. On multiple occasions he ventures out into the darkness to pull a wounded soldier into the relative safety of the inner defense perimeter.

In the morning, after a night of intense fire fights, another Pedro returns to a now quiet battle site. Pararescueman A1C Harry O'Beirne is lowered by hoist to evacuate the few remaining survivors. He finds "Pitts" lying across a deceased soldier to whom he had been administering medical aid. In his hand is his weapon, aiming out into the now-silent jungle. He had been shot repeatedly. Of the 180 men with whom "Pitts" had fought his last battle, only 14 were still uninjured. The survivors of this vicious fight stated that they were in awe of this young man who stayed behind and helped them. Many of them testified that "Pitts" had personally saved their lives, he was a real hero.

Airman Pitsenbarger is awarded the Air Force Cross, posthumously. He becomes the first enlisted recipient of the Air Force Cross in its history. The Air Force Association now annually honors a single Airman for the most heroic act of the year. It is simply called the "Pitsenbarger Award."

"The Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service is legendary for heroism in peace and war. No one better exemplifies its motto, That Others May Live, than Bill Pitsenbarger. He descended voluntarily into the hell of a jungle firefight with valor as his only shield--and valor was his epitaph." Air Force Magazine Oct 83 Pitts folder

22 Apr 66

F-4B SAR p.54#1

May 66

ARRS/CC Col. Allison Brooks personally demonstrates feasibility of Fulton Recovery System. P.75#1

1 May 66

37<sup>th</sup> ARRS declared operational.

10 May 66

F-105 SAR p57#1

25 May 66

SAR trap. H-3 shot off with battle damage but made it back to a friendly field. P.52#1

26 May 1966

Headquarters USAF, The Pentagon. Air Force Chief of Staff, John P. McConnell, approves a distinctive Pararescue uniform featuring maroon beret and bloused trousers over combat boots. The beret becomes a symbol of esteem, signifying the blood sacrificed by pararescuemen and their devotion to duty in aiding others in distress. Captain Peter Rundquist, a pararescue staff officer, plays a pivotal role in convincing the Air Staff to approve this recognition.

30 May 66

F-105 SAR p59#1

1 June 66

Lt. Col. Alan R. Vette assumes command of 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS

14 June 66

A-1H SAR p67#!

June 66

Three additional HC-130's assigned to Udorn, bringing total HC-130's on station to five. HC-130 unit becomes Det. 1, 37 ARRS

July 66

2 HH-3E's assigned DaNang

Escaped POW recovered p48#1

1 July 66

F-4C SAR p64#1

12 July 66

STAFF SERGEANT ROBERT L. BERRY. Sergeant Berry dies in Thailand.

He is assigned to the HH-3 Jolly Green Giant squadron at Udorn RTAFB shortly after its arrival to Thailand. The unit's mission takes it into the remote mountainous regions of Laos, where it stages out of a highly classified CIA-controlled site, and performs rescues deep into North Vietnam and enemy-held Laos. Living conditions are primitive, rudimentary at best. It is believed Bob contracts Black Water Fever while serving at one such site

20 July 66

Lt. Dieter Dengler escaped from POW camp in Laos. Picked up by HH-3E out of DaNang

27 July 66

F-105 SAR. The pilot Captain James R. Mitchel was recovered

3 September 66

On Sep. 3, 1966, North Vietnam sent up its MIG-21's in force for the first time from five air bases which had not previously been attacked because of U.S. policy. By the end of the year, Rolling Thunder had progressed northward reaching the Hanoi area and now included these MIG bases.

17 September 66

HH-3E lands on Gulf of Tonkin to rescue downed pilot. Sea state was at maximum limitations for H-3 landing. Pilot was saved. *Award citation Tobey. Tobey folder.*

19 September 66

HH-43F (DaNang?) rescues pilots of downed B-57. Tobey on board. *Tobey award citation*

18 October 66

An HU-16 commanded by Major Ralph H. Angstat took off in marginal weather to fly a normal patrol over the Gulf of Tonkin. The weather deteriorated and the crew failed to report in on a routine radio check. When conditions cleared, a second HU-16 scrambled to search for the missing aircraft but found nothing. Neither wreckage, bodies, nor survivors were ever found. The HU-16 and its six crewmen had disappeared.

AIRMAN SECOND CLASS STEVEN H. ADAMS. The HU-16, on which Airman Adams is a crewmember, departs its base under marginal weather conditions to fly a routine SAR patrol over the Gulf of Tonkin. The weather continues to deteriorate, and eventually, the crew fails to report in on a routine radio check. When conditions permit, another HU-16 launches to search for the first, joined by USN aircraft and surface ships. Neither wreckage, bodies, nor survivors are ever found. The six crewmen, including Steve, have disappeared without a trace. The crew is off officially declared killed-in-action (KIA) on 18 July 1973. *Source = 50 yrs*

14 Dec 66

The first in flight air refueling of an HH-3 by HC-130P was completed at Eglin AFB. Air refueling would revolutionize Air Rescue for decades to come. This capability was ordered to be rushed to SEA.

Dec 66

PJ Franklin D. Stevson participates in Bob Hope Christmas show, sings a song he composed "Ballad of the Jolly Greens".

By the end of 1966, the dismal days that saw air operations conducted without effective rescue pas passed. A downed aircrew, depending on where it was located, could look forward to one in three chance of rescue. Much had been demanded of the men in the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, but much more would be required. p.77#7

