

A Summary of December 1969 Events for Boxer 22 by Norman Malayney

Two 12th TFW airmen were shot down and parachuted in Laos. Surrounded by the enemy for 51 hours, one survivor eluded capture after 16-failed rescue attempts, until successfully retrieved by an HH-3 helicopter. The following is a summary of events, culled from documents at USAF HRA, Maxwell AB and NARA, College Park, MD. Robert Lapointes' book, "The Rescue of Boxer 22" documents the definitive rescue account detailing tape-recorded SAR/FAC communications and aircrew interviews.

The 558 TFS fraged two crews for an interdiction mission to Laos the morning of 5 December 1969. Capt. Benjamin Danielson and Lt. Woodrow Bergeron flew F-4C 63-7444, as Boxer 22 having the names Capt. Jake Jacobs and Capt. Dorsey Prince printed on the lower-left canopy. The two-element flight departed Cam Ranh AB with Major Joseph Young flying Lead as Boxer 21. CAVU weather conditions covered the attack area as each aircraft rolled in and began pounding the target. During recover from a dive-bomb pass, Boxer 22 received strikes from enemy ground fire. At 5,000 feet the aircraft began to lose altitude and plunged into a steep dive. As recalled by the GIB, Lt. Woodrow Bergeron: "We had just dropped our ordnance and were pulling the nose up when the aircraft suddenly pitched up, then down. I immediately started initiating ejection and prior to my leaving the aircraft, due to seat reaction time, I heard both Ben and our flight lead, Major Joe Young say, 'Bail Out'."

When he ejected at 1,000 feet, the wind blast ripped off Bergeron's helmet causing a gash and fractured his nose bridge. The parachute canopy fully deployed but during initial descent, one riser or shoulder strap came unbuckled. "On the way down, my first thought was how lucky I was to get a hold of that other riser."

Two good chutes were observed and the aircraft impacted some 2,600 feet from the two men. During descent Bergeron observed enemy automatic weapons fire directed at him while guiding himself to a clearing near a river bank. Ground fire continued as he touched ground, shed his parachute equipment, and dashed for cover in a Bamboo stand. He hid under a log and grabbed his survival radio. "I could hear the enemy fire ricocheting over my head," he recalls. "I called up, told them who I was, where I was, and to come and get me. It seemed like the helicopter and the A-1s were there almost instantaneous."

Both men landed safely, 115 feet apart on opposite side of the Ngo River, 3,900-feet south-southwest of Ban Pha Nop village, located between routes 23 and 1202 in Khammouane Province, Laos. The river flowed through the center of a 2,000-foot wide karst-lined valley. The tops of steep hills extended 1,000 feet above the semi-barren valley floor. Previously, the area underwent extensive bombing, leaving scant vegetation for cover except along the river itself, and among elevated areas. The survivors elected to remain near their chutes as it was the only area with foliage affording viable protective concealment.

The men actually touched-down on the river bed proper, a sandy area between the water's edge and the river banks, which were about 20-feet high on Bergeron's east side. He had some 15 feet of space between the water and the bank and hid himself among a small bamboo stand. Danielson landed on the west side with an injured ankle, in a wider area which offered only a small group of trees for concealment.

Boxer 21 notified SAR at 0928L and remained with FAC in the area until 0946L, then returned to base due to low fuel. Meanwhile, Bergeron tended the lacerated nose bridge by compressing a glove on the wound with a band from his survival kit.

A Sandy arrived at 1008L and established contact with the survivors, both reported near their chutes and in good condition. After approximately one hour had passed, both men seemed to have settled down and awaited rescue. When SAR forces arrived, the initial Sandy “on scene commander” requested FAC to order in slow movers with soft ordnance for small arms suppression and fast movers with hard ordnance for heavy anti-aircraft guns reported southeast of the survivor’s position.

“When SAR arrived, the enemy opened up with 23, 37 and 57 mm AAA and CPU from positions in the karst paralleling the river. I saw and heard AAA and heavy small arms fire from all quadrants during rescue attempts. The A-1s were receiving heavy ground fire from all directions. I knew the only way they were going to get me out of there, was if I could tell them where all the guns were firing from, and how far away they were. So I sat on the ground with my compass and read off headings.”

Weather consisted of scattered clouds at 4,000 with ground fog, visibility 3 – 5 NM as two Jolly Green (JG) HH-3 helicopters arrived and prepared to enter the smoke-filled valley.

- 1345L, JG-17 attempted a pickup, but incurred battle damage from heavy ground fire and forced to exit the area.
- 1359L, JG-09 proceeded in, received ground fire, and aborted pickup after developing engine trouble and exited the area.
- 1457L, JG-76 pilot by Capt. Holly G. Bell headed in for pickup and reported the following details of his rescue attempt:

Both JG-76 and -72 were scrambled from backup alert...on the Boxer 22 SAR effort. En route we picked up an A-1 escort to accompany us into the area. We arrived in the SAR...and placed in a stacking orbit position, five nautical miles west over the karst area, along with JG-9 and 17, and two Sandys for escorts.

In very short order JG-09 was called in to make an attempt, but was forced to abandon, suffering both engine problems and receiving heavy ground fire. JG-17 immediately assumed low position and attempted a pickup but was driven off by intense ground fire.

JG-76 assumed low position and waited while ordnance was delivered in the area to silence the ground fire. At this point we had been airborne for nearly three hours and began preparation for air refueling with King Three (KC-130P).

Before effecting rendezvous for refueling, Sandy Lead ordered another rescue attempt, and preparation for air refueling discontinued. An immediate descent was initiated to the SAR site. Sandy Lead briefed us to approach from WNW at high speed and low altitude, which we did. We immediately began receiving ground fire from the top of the karst, about a mile and a half from the survivor’s positions. We were under fire of varying intensity until we exited the area.

Airman Davison was the first to spot and return fire from the #3 gun position. He fired almost continuously until fatally struck in the head by an enemy round. Breaking out of the karst area over the open valley, the ground fire dropped off momentarily, and then increased tremendously.

The Sandys were dropping CBU's and firing 20 mm cannon shells into the karst face and ground area immediately within 100 feet of us. The flight engineer mistook a string of CBU's detonating as heavy ground fire, and called for me to abort the attempt. He immediately realized his mistake and called for me to continue. I had started to roll right to exit the area, but reversed the roll violently and continued the approach. This placed me directly over Boxer 22A at high speed, headed directly into the karst face, infested with enemy gun positions. I began a series of hard, violent turns directly over Boxer 22A (Danielson) while descending to about fifty feet over the trees in the areas.

During this time I observe one, large-caliber tracer round pass on the right side, but I directed my main attention to surveying below for the lowest possible area to hover near Boxer 22A (Danielson). Now nearly in a hover at this point, I let down to the river bed for pickup. The ship was just coming out of translational lift when the crew called that enemy arms fire was increasing, then really erupted. Through the noise created by the engines, rotors, and the craft's min-guns, "it sounded like we were caught in a pop-corn machine."

At the same time #2 gun was expended and the gunner began firing his M-16 out the door. As the helicopter began to sink below the level of the barren trees into the river bed, it received multiple hits in the fuselage and rotor system. The aircraft began to vibrate badly, and if receiving further strikes, would be shot down. I applied power and began to exit the area.

As I approached the karst face on the western side of the valley, I observed numerous caves along the karst base, which the crew said held gun positions firing heavily on the helicopter. During egress from the valley, I received notification that Davison had been badly hit. I instructed the men to give him aid but shortly after received word, Davison was dead. The flight continued its return to base.

The crew inspected the aircraft for battle damage. They found numerous holes in the fuselage and right auxiliary tank, along with a steady hydraulic leak in the forward cabin area. The aircraft still vibrated moderately as climb was entered at 80 knots. Once safely out of the area, different speed ranges were tried to determine any effects on the vibration. At 105 to 120 knots the vibration disappeared. We maintained this speed back to base. About 30 miles from base the utility hydraulic system failed as a result of the hydraulic leak. The crew began to review bailout procedures and discussed the systems affected by utility hydraulic systems failures.

A shallow approach to a running landing was made on let down. This type-approach was selected in lieu of a hover landing due to the unknown extent of damage to the rotor system, which might not be able to sustain a hover landing. When brake function failed on the landing roll, the rotor system was used to stop the aircraft. Later inspections revealed the aircraft had taken severe hits in three rotor blades, swash plate, and utility hydraulic systems, in addition to numerous large holes in the fuselage and one crewman KIA — 90251 medical specialist A1C David Michael Davison from San Jose, CA.

- 1627L, Sandy Lead vectored JG-69 for an extraction attempt, but after receiving a large caliber direct hit, the HH-3 returned to Da Nang with JG-77 escorting. Meanwhile, Danielson reported enemy troops approaching very close west of his position.
- 1812L, JG-79 moved in to attempt pickup but after receiving heavy damage from enemy ground fire, forced to egress westward out of the valley.
- 1819L, JG-68 entered the area and requested Danielson pop a smoke flare. The helicopter had him in sight but received damaging small arms fire, forcing an exit from the area. Unfortunately, the smoke flare compromised Danielson's exact location to the enemy.
- 1843L, JG-72 entered the valley for a retrieval attempt and received small arms fire; it continued the run-in, but after receiving direct hits, vacated the immediate area.

The F-105s, A-6s, A1s and F-4Cs for a total of 25 aircraft unloaded ordnance throughout the afternoon trying to provide cover for the incoming helicopters. The SAR craft continued to take damaging hits. Bergeron observed Danielson twice scurry out then back to his hideout during failed rescue approaches.

Heavy enemy ground fire drove back all rescue efforts and the operations terminated due to darkness. At 1848L, frustrated SAR forces returned to base with another effort planned early next morning. They advised Boxer 22 to dig in for the night. As darkness rapidly descended, Bergeron retired into his own thoughts, safely concealed in the bamboo clump.

SAR questioned the feasibility of both men inflating their life vests and floating down the river after dark. This would probably place them in a worse position and disable their RT-10 radios. Also if they moved during the night, SAR would experience difficulty locating them, making further rescue efforts problematic.

During the first night, both downed men maintained contact with each other over their survival radios. Danielson advised Bergeron that if the enemy approached too close to his position for a voice transmission, he would key his beeper to maintain communications. During the night, Bergeron monitored his survival radio occasionally and reported receiving beeper warnings several times indicating NVA were in close proximity. He actually heard and observed enemy troops methodically search the area where Danielson lay concealed.

Towards daybreak of the second day, Bergeron heard several loud and excited voices from across the river, followed by a burst of automatic weapons fire and a chilling scream. After the activity subsided, he did not observe any further enemy movement, or hear from Danielson, other than a distinct fiberglass sound of a seat-pack dropped to the ground. Subsequent attempts to establish radio contact with Capt. Danielson proved unsuccessful.

6 December

First light effort commenced at 0505L. Weather clear, 4,000 feet scattered visibility 4 NM in haze as FAC flew over the area. Eventually parked in high orbits, F-4s, F-105s, F-100s, A-4s, A-6s, A-37s, and A1E/H aircraft waited their call to sanitize the area between rescue attempts.

“The next day went pretty much the same, but the enemy positions were hidden in caves and bunkers, and it took quite a bit to silence them.”

- 0852L, NVA troops now occupied the area where Danielson's parachute lay and were attempting to cross the river towards Bergeron. FAC ordered aircraft to lay ordnance in the river and prevented the enemy from reaching him.
- 1037L, FAC confirmed contact with Bergeron only and that Danielson had probably been captured.
- 1100L, FAC received a prolonged beeper from a survival radio, but Bergeron did not transmit this signal. Heavy ground fire was reported and various ordinance (CBU-14-22-30) was laid in the area until 1255L.

At 1257L, Jolly Green JG-77 moved in to attempt pickup but immediately began receiving strikes. Bergeron raced out to a bluff, believing the helicopter copilot had spotted him. Since the embankment was steep, he presumed the HH-3 crewman lost sight of him as he started up the slope. Bergeron clawed his way upward to within six feet of the hovering craft, when a fusillade of bullets racked the fuselage, forcing it to pull away.

“I could see the skin coming off the helicopter,” he pointed out. “If they were willing to hover and take unbelievable ground fire, then I was willing to stick it out.”

- 1310L, JG-72, approaching under intense enemy fire developed a severe tail vibration and aborted the rescue attempt.
- 1518L, during the third attempt, ground fire became too intense, forcing JG-68 to pull out.
- 1754L, JG-03 enter the valley now heavily swathed in smoke. Bergeron observed the chopper head straight for him, and then lost it in the widespread smoke. When he did regain sight, the helicopter hovered on the wrong side of the river. Bergeron immediately directed it to his position. As it began moving towards him, the HH-3 encountered withering ground fire, forcing it to exit southbound.
- 1757 and 1845L, intense enemy fire drove back two further rescue attempts, forcing JG-19 and JG-76 to vacate the area. Meanwhile, Bergeron dashed out and back into his bamboo cover each time rescue approaches were made.

“It seemed the enemy waited for the helicopter to come near and then opened fire. I'm positive I was bait,” he commented.

Enemy firepower directed at the rescue effort again proved too intense. All rescue forces returned to base at 1857L and promised another effort at first light. Bergeron signed off on his radio to bed down for a second night. When darkness descended, he decided to seek another place to hide. At the nearby river he found a mangrove-like tree with roots exposed along the bank, a seemingly welcome place for concealment. In haste, he accidentally left his survival food back at the bamboo stand, but planned to return later and retrieve it.

Shortly after moving to his new hideout, three NVA soldiers came over the edge of the river and with automatic weapons, sprayed the bamboo thicket he just vacated. After searching the area, the enemy soldiers left. The closest any approached him was 15 feet.

Bergeron concluded he had three options left: 1. Bury himself in the sand. 2. Dig himself deeper into the tree root structure, or, 3. Swim to the other side of the river. Overcome with fatigue hindered burying himself in the sand. And digging himself deeper into the roots only snagged his flight suit. As he emerged from this effort, he discovered his 0.38 pistol had fallen into the roots and now lost. He then tried to swim the river, only to become exhausted when one-third across.

As he swam back, he spotted a large leafy plant similar to a rose bush but without thorns: five feet long, two feet wide and three feet high. He pulled it out by the roots with very little effort. Covering himself with the bush, he lay along the river bank, 100-feet north of his original hiding place. Suffering sleep deprivation throughout the ordeal, that night he experienced hallucinations such as seeing squadron mates.

7 December

In the early morning hours Bergeron heard an F-4 streak across the area several times. At first he thought it was a surveillance plane, but concluded the pilot wanted to communicate. So he picked up his radio and said, “Good morning.” The Phantom pilot informed him the course of action for the day.

“He had the A-1s and rescue aircraft there at dawn. I just sat there praying a lot and confident they were going to get me out. I knew they would. After what I'd seen them do every day, I knew they were going to get me out.”

At first light maximum rescue efforts commenced with all support aircraft properly positioned in the area. Again the sky began filling with fighter-bombers parked in orbits poised to attack. FAC ordered wave after wave of aircraft to roll in on bomb runs. Now alerted to Bergeron's exact location, the attacking pilots knew they could strike anything in the area--except that bush.

The sound of exploding bombs echoed through the valley. Unwavering, he remained immersed in the deafening roar from exploding ordnance directed around him as the air filled with flying shrapnel. There were times when the impact of bombs directed at the enemy, lifted him slightly off the ground. Operating the survival radio he assisted with directing air strikes, many close to his position. “I was calling for it all around me. One time they came within a foot of me on a strafing pass. That was kind of close, but very effective.” He said the enemy positioned themselves high in nearby trees. “That's where it had to be inserted.”

For several hours, slow and fast movers sanitized the area attacking enemy positions until 0926L when a Sandy brought in CBU-22s (smoke) and briefed JG-77 for pickup. At 0949L, the helicopter attempted a rescue but aborted due to poor visibility from smoke and haze created by the previous massive bombing preparations.

The rescue forces regrouped again, and after the dust settled, expended additional CBU-22s (smoke screen) and CBU-30 (riot gas) ordnance in the surrounding rescue area.

By 1223L, SAR initiated another rescue attempt. According to Lapointe's book, the Sandys flew a Daisy Circle, a low-circular path with each Skyraider providing covering fire below the area of the aircraft ahead. Thus the landing area received continuous protective coverage to suppress enemy ground fire.

Jolly Green JG-77 began let down through the veil of smoke at 1244L on the second attempt of the day, and by 1251L successfully achieved hover position over him. Without hesitation, Bergeron had plunged out into the river, and when the descending collar approached within reach, he held on and successfully hoisted on board at 1252L. "I will never forget how it feels to have that lowering device they used, wrapped around me. I knew I was part of that helicopter. "

Having eluded capture after 16-failed rescue attempts, he found himself en route to Thailand. The A-1E on scene commander reported the helicopter successfully exited the valley, and the HC-130 command post ordered all support aircraft to return to their base. The helicopter arrived at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB at 1037 hours.

Bergeron never lost faith in the men who were determined to rescue him, even though he experienced trouble from the beginning when his parachute riser became unfastened. His problems continued after he lost both water purification pills and small amount of water in his survival kit. Now parched and dehydrated, he drank from the river, not knowing if it was safe.

"I was confident they were going to get me out. So I brought them back some water to test." It passed the test.

Appearing tired and haggard from his 51-hour ordeal he emphasized the determination of the rescuers: "They'll get you out of there. Really! Just have a radio."

Addendum:

The largest SAR effort prior to the above event occurred over the 1968 Memorial Day weekend when USAF and USN aircraft flew 189 sorties to aid the rescue of a navy pilot. HC-130 aircraft flew as mission controllers, and Jolly Green helicopter crews flew more than 62 combat hours through the three day effort. On 31 May, North Vietnamese ground fire downed a navy A-7A of VA-82 from the aircraft carrier USS America. In spite of intensive ground fire and inclement weather which hampered the rescue effort, an HH-3 retrieved the pilot on the morning of 2 June. While providing close air support for the rescue operation, an A-1E Skyraider was downed by enemy fire and the pilot rescued immediately.

Earl Tilford in his book "Search and Rescue: The USAF in Southeast Asia" (1992), lists the Boxer 22 SAR effort the largest on record: 336 sorties were flown during the rescue; five A-1 Skyraiders received heavy damage, and five of ten HH-3 helicopters ravaged by ground fire were later scrapped.
