

The riveting account of a US Army Ranger's odyssey to lead a team of investigative experts on a quest to bring home America's POWs and MIAs still missing from the secret war in Laos and Cambodia.

Thick Luck - The Search for America's POWs & MIAs

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2593.html?s=pdf>

THICK LUCK

THE SEARCH FOR POWS & MIAS

Copyright © 2006 David A. Combs

ISBN-10 1-60145-017-6

ISBN-13 978-1-60145-017-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are not fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, *other than specified* is coincidental and not intended by the author. Care was taken to protect the identity of any official personalities requiring such protection. Any specific reference to a POW/MIA missing or recovered service member is with the approval and consent of the family.

All photographs are personal photos other than specified.

POW/MIA loss narratives are courtesy of Mary and Chuck Schantag
P.O.W. Network
www.pownetwork.org

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2006

David A. Combs
www.RangerCombs.com

THICK LUCK

THE SEARCH FOR POWS & MIAS

DAVID A. COMBS

Chapter 4

The Bone Hunters

The core members of the Laos Investigation Element had changed over a short period of months in 2001. A new and cohesive group including Suriyan Collins, Greg Parmele, Adam Pierce, and Sammy Vilaysane, had developed over a series of JFAs. They were physically very strong and brought an intensity that took us to a new level. This group would provide the endurance, fearlessness, and competitive spirit, to reach the remote sites. They were also blessed with individual talents that empowered our investigation plans.

Master Sergeant Suriyan Collins was an Army Non-Commissioned Officer in his mid-thirties and of Thai decent. He stood about five foot ten inches tall and was a totally focused and professional Assistant Team Leader. He was also fluent in Lao and Thai which made him absolutely invaluable to the team. His combat arms experience made the difference in planning, safety, and equipment preparation. Never did you have to question his focus or will to succeed.

Sergeant First Class Greg Parmele was also an Army Non-Commissioned Officer in his mid-thirties. He was fluent in Thai and functional in Lao and Cambodian. He stood about six foot one and spent much of his spare time running, hiking and biking the island of Oahu. He was a great analyst and interviewer. He also had a knack for making the officials and witnesses relax enough to trust our intentions.

Sergeant Adam Pierce was an Army NCO in his early twenties. He was functional in the Lao language, about five foot eleven, lean and muscular. He was a team analyst, smart,

THICK LUCK

ambitious and gung-ho. He was ready for any challenge and I relied on him to come with me on the tough climbs.

Sergeant Sammy Vilaysan was an Army NCO and the cog of the team. He was of Lao descent and our linguist for almost all interviews and negotiations. He was trusted by the Lao and easily endeared himself to the village elders where ever we went. He was shorter at around five foot six and heavy around the middle. We called him "Fat Sammy." Sammy was scared of heights and no adventurer, but he brought success to the team that was both immeasurable and invaluable.

Later, we added SGT Rudy Alvarez, a young Marine NCO and Intelligence Analyst. He stood around six feet tall and a solid two-hundred pounds. He was a funny guy who was always seeking competition at the ping pong table or while trekking up a mountain. He was a strong and capable addition to the team.

If I had to describe myself during this period, it would be focused, tireless, pensive, experienced, and competent. The Lao described me as "strong like bull." This was the result of a two day climb up a mountain to a remote crash site in Khammouan Province. Even with a rucksack of equipment, I out climbed a set of young Lao guides carrying nothing but a machete.

Every evening the team would huddle to discuss the successes of the previous day and the game plan for the next. We could not underestimate the basic nuts and bolts of moving men and machines over long distances and onto remote landing sites throughout Laos. We factored in the relationship and daily attitude of national, province, district, and local officials and the will and ability of the MI-17 aircrew to complete their mission. Previously, we had two incidents where the Lao pilot refused to fly us where we needed to go. On the first occasion, the pilot lost his nerve. On the second occasion, the pilot claimed to not have the skills to land on a mountain. Within a few days, the pilots were replaced and the missions completed. Other

THICK LUCK

variables were the tribal makeup of Laos. This mix included the somewhat hospitable Hmong and the uncooperative and distrusting Lao Teung tribes. The Lao Teung culturally did not like outsiders. I wrote home often with stories of our challenges.

Mon, 26 Mar 2001

Good morning from Laos,

It's a rainy morning and I ran over, got a cup of coffee (O.K. two) and got to the commo building to send a msg before the day gets away from me. Looks like the rain is trying to hamper us today but we have a lot of work to do regardless within driving distance.

Wow, it is really pouring rain now. Thunder and lightning also. We had an interesting morning yesterday. We flew to a Lao Teung village in central Laos where the Lao don't like outsiders. Not just foreigners but even other Lao. Apparently for generations there was tribal discrimination. We landed and a crowd ran to both helos (one is a big Lao army transport) and asked what the hell we were doing there. Our officials all dressed in their Laos Army uniforms tried to explain (we had national, province, and district officials) and the area village chief had his guys watching with AK-47's. He said not only were we not supposed to be there but we could not leave until we got clearance from the main area chief. So, we got detained under guard for half a day until the area chief, in a village three miles away, decided we could leave.

Many hours were spent pouring over maps, photos and historical references under a dull light bulb swirling with moths, termites and mosquitoes. We were never satisfied to enter an area after just one planning session. We made sure we were familiar with all cases in a geographic area. This meant each

THICK LUCK

and every day could have an immediate twist which could send us in an unexpected direction.

These quick shifts in direction made the Lao officials very uncomfortable. Yan and Sammy were very adept at reassuring the officials of our intent to pursue an undefined lead which had just presented itself. To their credit, for the most part, the officials supported our fluid style of operation without knowing what it could generate. Surprises were hard to manage.

This style of investigation also was not readily accepted in the Operations Directorate at JTF-FA. Joe Patterson was the Assistant Operations Director and had been the Cambodian Team Leader throughout the late 1990's. During that period, you were to move fast and pursue written and defined leads on many specific cases. That showed attention to many cases and briefed well to the public. We had broken that restrictive mold and were supported by Bill Forsythe, in the Lao analysis department and Lieutenant Colonel George, the new Operations Director. This fluid style took us to villages, located witnesses, and brought finality to cases as the opportunity presented itself. This wasn't a political or strategic style—it was operational, tactical, and dictated by the men in the field.

Reaching the remote sites took mutual trust between pilots and team, and we rehearsed and discussed our techniques often. In the work my team did, the helicopter rarely put two skids on the ground for any operation—it was likely one or no skids. Going in we had to jump and then have the chain saws lowered in by chain or rope. This allowed you to cut trees to allow the helicopter to get close enough to the ground to climb back up, usually off of a stump or rock. This was very dangerous and there was no medical search and rescue team anywhere in Laos that would come to our aid. If someone was injured, we would have to carry him out to a clearing. That was complicated because the mountains did not have clearings. That was the

THICK LUCK

problem we wrestled with—how to conduct dangerous operations with no good plan for a medical evacuation.

That was also why we always had a Special Forces Medic with us. They were masters at stabilizing a patient and keeping him alive until he could reach a higher standard of care. To qualify as a Special Forces Medic, a man had to keep a goat alive after it had been administered a small caliber gunshot wound. Not any gunshot wound—the skin would be pulled and stretched to the side, a gunshot administered, and the skin released back into position. Therefore, the gunshot was not where the hole in the skin was located.



Stepping on the skid – a hovering LZ.

We often discussed amongst ourselves and the pilots what we would do in a life threatening situation. Of particular

THICK LUCK

concern were the most critical injuries, such as a severed limb. There were only two answers to the problem. The first option was to attempt to reach the main base camp. It could be hours away but there was a U.S. trauma doctor on duty there. The second option was to crash the border into Thailand to a better medical facility. This was the ultimate extreme since the pilots assumed they would never be allowed back into Laos, but to save a life they would do it.

* * *

INTO THE DARKNESS

The ground raced by on both sides of our small helicopter as we raced down the Xekong River gorge, in south central Laos. We were heading east in an attempt to get back to our base camp. We had been about forty miles to the west to a series of small mountains along the Vietnam border. There we were searching for an Army Green Beret lost in a helicopter crash and missing since the Vietnam War. For a week we had waited in our base camp in Salavan City for a break in the weather. Dark low clouds had settled from a typhoon in the South China Sea. Earlier in the morning the rain stopped and the clouds lifted to reveal the mountains, which separated us from the remote area along the Vietnam/Laos border. After consultation with the helicopter pilots, we decided to make a run to the east. We skimmed the treetops just under a heavy cloud ceiling and dropped into the river gorge. Once in the gorge, we scooted up the river valley under the cover of a dark cottony blanket of clouds which obscured the tops of the mountains.

Now it was late afternoon and Eric, our New Zealand pilot, had told my small team to get on board because the clouds were looking darker to the west—we needed to go. Sammy my linguist, Pierce my analyst, and two Lao officials were in the back seat. I occupied the copilot seat on the left. We took off and zoomed down the river valley. The clouds had settled in and now there was the sensation of flying down a tube—steep slopes on both sides, rushing water underneath and a ceiling of thick heavy clouds right above our heads. We hoped to get to a bend in the river where it abruptly turned ninety degrees to the left and south. There the gorge widened slightly, and we hoped there would be more wind to lift the clouds. If not, we could fly

THICK LUCK

farther south until we found a hole in the clouds to get over the hump.

We made the turn and felt a bit of relief. Now, if worse went to worse, we could at least set the helicopter down on a riverbank. The clouds were still low and we peered out the right side of the aircraft looking for an opening. Unexpectedly, the aircraft banked hard to the right and we now skimmed the treetops toward the hump.



Piloting the Squirrel.

Eric said calmly, “I think we can make it.” We could see treetops and clouds swirling just high enough that we could see more treetops disappear into the clouds. Then there was nothing. Everything went dark as the clouds engulfed us and monsoon rain pounded the exterior of the chopper.

THICK LUCK

Erik said, “Watch my GPS and tell me if we get off track.”

There was a small window by my feet and I watched the bottom of our aircraft literally skim one-hundred foot trees. I replied with a sense of irritation, “What? You watch the fucking trees coming up through our floor!” Sammy slapped my shoulder and with wide bug eyes and frantic hand movements pointed down at the trees that threatened to pull us in. We had just lost seven of our comrades in a helicopter crash in Vietnam in better conditions than this—we should *not* have found ourselves in this position.



Clouds cloaking the mountain.

Eric pulled back on the stick and attempted to gain altitude. As we increased altitude, the mountain still loomed in front of us and the trees appeared as shadows in the mist. I glanced at

THICK LUCK

Erik and his eyes were glued on the GPS and altimeter. He said, "If I can get to 4,000 feet I think we will be above the highest peak here."

I looked at him to check the level of confidence on his face and asked, "Are you sure?" This was a situation where everything that could have gone wrong did. Now, surviving was in the hands of our bush pilot.

"*Pretty* sure," he replied.

The rotors beat heavily in the deluge of water and we slowly went up. The trees finally disappeared from the floor window. Then there was nothing but dark grayness and the pounding of water. Erik watched the altimeter and then slowly pushed the stick forward. Staring intently out the front window, we expected to see a looming mountain or hazy shadow of a large redwood tree materialize out of the thick nothingness in front of us.

After what seemed an eternity, the darkness began to fade. We saw a bit of lighter clouds, a wisp, and finally a window in the haze to take us down the other side of the hump.

* * *

That event was the beginning of a two-year search from hell that would stress and challenge the Lao IE each time we trekked into those mountains. The challenges stacked against us in this area with rugged small mountains, unpredictable weather patterns, long flight distances, and no villages from which to find guides or witnesses. This was a real test of the Investigation Element's determination and abilities. Other teams had come before us and they had left empty handed.

For two years, we had simultaneously investigated two cases on two adjacent small mountains separated by three kilometers

THICK LUCK

and on opposite sides of the Xekong River. This was the mountainous border region of Salavan and Xekong Provinces and host to rugged mountains and terrible weather conditions. In addition, there was another crash site of a fighter plane nearby with no evidence to narrow down the location. With each trip to those mountains we restudied all the historical data, poured over the maps of previous attempts, and tried to find that one shred of evidence that would crack any of those cases.

The first case involved a Green Beret who was aboard a South Vietnamese HH-34 helicopter trying to lower a chainsaw to a Prairie Fire Team. This team consisted of two-hundred South Vietnamese Rangers under attack on the mountaintop. The Green Beret successfully delivered the chainsaw before his helicopter crashed on the side of the mountain. He was never heard from again. We had searched that mountain for two years, up and down, in very disciplined sectors. It was a series of steep drop-offs, ledges, loose rocks and the thickest thorn bushes imaginable. Those sharp thorny vines and bushes would lay in wait to cut open your scalp and exposed skin.

The evidence of the battle was still there with fighting positions, ammunition cans, smoke grenades remnants, and other residue from the battle. We had determined the likely helicopter PZ the team had cut with the chainsaw. From this location we attempted to recreate the battle and estimate the likely location of our lost helicopter.

It was on that mountain that I encountered the biggest snake I had ever seen in the field. I was slowly walking by myself and noticed something moving on the ground to my front. About ten meters in front of me was a huge greenish snake writhing with a smaller blackish snake. This bigger snake was at least eight feet long and as thick as my arm. I moved forward and they detected me approaching. Both snakes bounced off the

THICK LUCK

ground in a flash and disappeared into a bamboo thicket. I was amazed a snake could move that quickly.

Time and again we had trudged up and down those mountains and had found no evidence of the helicopter crash site known to be nearby. Each attempt to locate the site was extremely grueling and the team both embraced the challenge but sensed a state of futility. We knew that without a witness, we could walk within a few meters of the site and never have a clue it was there. In the end, we were missing that one thing you always needed in the jungle—a local guide.

* * *

THICK LUCK

PERSISTENT LUCK

I heard Don Guthrie call over the radio, “*Where are you?*” He circled above the jungle canopy to get better reception from our small hand held radios.

“I’m not sure. We’re about halfway down the slope and heading toward the river,” I said as I picked my way over a slippery streambed which dropped off below me.

“You guys have got to get out of there. It’s getting late and it looks like thunderstorms are coming.” He said sternly.

“We’re moving!” I said, and we continued to push on. “There were always thunderstorms coming to this area,” I muttered to myself.

I could see my two other team members spread out in a loose line as we followed each other down. Our group included me, Adam Pierce, and an EOD augmenter. Greg Parmele was somewhere down below but in radio contact. We had searched this damned mountain so many times. It was littered with drop-offs, cliffs, and impassable vegetation. The weather here along the Vietnam border was always unpredictable. Wind and rain could wash in at any moment and keep us stranded in the “ultimate boonies.”

Once we reached the bottom of the slope, the streambed transitioned from slippery rocks to mud and sand. With better footing, we ran ahead until we hit thick grass. You had to protect your face with your hands or the grass would cut you open, leaving thin painful cuts. Then, with no warning, we broke out of the grass and into the open space of a small river about thirty feet wide. We turned left and followed the bank or ran in the water when it was shallow. Soon we popped out of another section of grass along the bank and there was Greg. All together we pushed on. We were drenched with sweat. Clouds of gnats, mosquitoes and horse flies circled our heads.

THICK LUCK

“Don, we’re at the river,” I called into my radio.

“I’m on my way.” He called back.

We continued to follow the bank and a few minutes later he called back.

“I don’t see you. Can you hear the Squirrel?”

I stopped walking and we all listened. We could just make out the sound of his engines and rotors further down river.

“Don, come farther upstream.”

As he rocketed around the corner, he spotted us near the bank. The bright red and white Squirrel rose up above the lowest trees, banked around, and came back down to a hover ten feet above the water. “What in the hell are you guy’s doing up here?” he said with a tone of irritation.

I didn’t bother to answer and surveyed our possibilities of getting on the Squirrel near our present location. The trees and vegetation were thick and tall and the water looked deep. There was no place to get picked up. “Can you pick us up further down stream?” I said. I held my radio to my mouth with one hand and pointed downstream with the other. Don turned his head, looked at me, and shook his head side to side in the negative. He had been surveying the situation also. “We need to hurry, get into the water, and get onto the skid,” he radioed.

The four of us jumped in with our bags held above our heads and waded out until the water was at chin level. Don hovered straight above us and put his skids right on the water. He positioned the left skid closest to us as this allowed him to keep his bodyweight on the opposite side. Balancing the aircraft in gusty winds, while men climbed on the skids, was always risky. We pushed up one team member, handed up the rucksacks, pushed up a second team member, and Don flew away to off load them at the MI-17 parked down stream.

Greg and I stood there up to our necks in water feeling pretty lonely. A few minutes later the Squirrel came rocketing around

THICK LUCK

the corner again. It banked dramatically to the left above the jungle and came down to a hover again. I pushed Greg up and then followed. It was extremely difficult to climb onto a wet skid in heavily soaked clothes. Greg pulled me inside. The river pickup was completed and we headed to the MI-17. The wind chilled me, and I sat shivering as water dripped out of our clothing and soaked the inside of the bird

“You have got to stop doing this,” Don said as he glanced over at me through his tinted visor and held up his left index finger to accentuate the point. “You’re pushing too hard.”

* * *

We never did find that helicopter after all the searches we had done—finally we got lucky. By sheer chance, when we arrived at the MI-17, we ran into a Vietnamese fisherman who had sneaked across the border with his son on a day trip. As Don repositioned personnel in the two aircraft, we conducted a quick interview. Luckily, we had a District official with us who spoke Vietnamese. We huddled in a small circle on the water’s edge and asked the fisherman if he knew of a crash site on the hill. The fisherman pointed at the hill and shook his head yes. He explained that he had been in the army and had gone to the site previously. To make matters better, he knew of two more crash sites nearby and up river. This immediately correlated to two more sites we were looking for.

This was a complete breach of witness protocol because this was not an official Vietnamese witness. In theory, he had violated the border. After some quick negotiation, the Lao officials agreed to allow the fisherman to guide us to the helicopter on the hill. The other sites would have to wait until after a Tri-Lateral investigation could be arranged between Vietnam, Laos, and the U.S. To find all three sites, in one JFA,

THICK LUCK

would have been too much progress in a short period of time. The Lao always preferred the slow, more profitable, and diplomatically advantageous Tri-lateral process.

Two days later, Greg Parmele went with the Vietnamese fisherman/veteran and found the site. It was right off the trail and fifty feet down a sheer slope. Unfortunately, it was located on the opposite side of the ridgeline from where it was reported to be located. We had walked within thirty meters of that crash site at least ten times over the years. This find was a very big find and the result of an incredible investment in time and energy. We returned two days later and conducted a complete site survey.

All of the major metal parts had been scavenged and taken off the mountain. All that remained was a pile of charred metal and ash. It was common in remote site like this for the scavengers to melt the aluminum down and make it easier to carry. By sifting through the ash and surrounding vegetation we discovered reading glasses, uniform buttons, and personal items. We also found a chainsaw blade like the one the Green Beret Sergeant had attempted to deliver to the troops on the ground. It finally took a stroke of luck to find the right witness to locate that crash site. Now we could get the case to the Recovery Elements. The team was happy we would not have to go on that hill again.

* * *

The day before our survey of the helicopter crash site, we sent our 'scoot' team of me, MSG Collins and Greg Parmele up the other hill. We were searching for another Green Beret reported to be fighting from a bomb crater with two other Americans and three local fighters. The team was surrounded and rescue helicopters tried multiple attempts to extract them. Each

THICK LUCK

attempt to hoist out a team member resulted in their being shot in the hoist. The Green Beret we were searching for rose to throw a grenade and was hit in the forehead. The only team member to survive was the last Green Beret who evaded the enemy and was rescued later on. The body of our Green Beret was left behind due to the heavy presence of enemy in the area. All we knew was he was left in a bomb crater near the summit.

We forged hard through the brush, grass, and vines. We reached the top much faster than we had anticipated. Then we had the chain saws lowered in on a rope. We planned to cut a LZ to use over the next two days to search the hilltop with the whole team. We began to cut away and soon we had a hole opened in the canopy. As we expanded it, Don flew up to take a look. He directed us to cut some more on the lead edge. This was not going to be a landing zone. It would have to be another “hovering zone” and he wanted room to maneuver his tail.

I stood on an already fallen tree and completed the last cut on the last tree. As it fell downhill, the tree I stood on shifted and I fell into a straddle position with my foot wedged. The falling tree went away from me and rocked forward on the other fallen trees making the base end rise high into the air. That was when time went into slow motion. That tree was going to come straight down and crush me. I was in such an awkward position that there was no leverage to push myself backwards. As I looked up, I could see that tree was on its way back down. After throwing the chainsaw to the ground I managed to inch myself slightly uphill. In a state of mental and physical fatigue, I resigned myself to the fact that I was going to lose my right leg—if not worse. The tree crashed to a halt with its trunk resting on one of the trees I had just previously cut. I freed myself from the stump and directed we put the saws away. We had pressed our luck for this LZ.

THICK LUCK



A ridge top landing zone cut in Khammouan province.

Our team searched along near vertical slopes and located and searched more than eight large bomb craters. A thorough search produced no conclusive evidence. We did find spent 5.56mm shell casings in a crater with a stamped date consistent with the period of the incident. After more searching, we found no other evidence. This mountain would take many days of searching to have any likelihood of finding the correct bomb crater. Even then it was a long shot that the body had not been moved at the time of the incident or over the last thirty-five years. I was certain the Vietnamese from across the border would have the key to this case. We recommended we interview that same fisherman at the earliest opportunity.

THICK LUCK

* * *

The sequence of successes we having were captured in a series of emails I sent home. These excerpts provide insight into the daily efforts of the team. The JFA had started very slowly and with little success. It gained speed as the JFA progressed.

4 Nov:

Today we are going back to the "Land before time!" What a throwback village! Our linguists cannot talk to them and a local official has to translate into Lao. It is a regional and local dialect. Kind of a scary place. National Geographic stuff. Hopefully, they will hold the key to at least one case and maybe more because they are a mobile society. Wish us luck."

8 Nov, 1710 Hrs:

We are now 1/3 through the JFA and I'm smoked right now too. The days have been long and unproductive. This is my 10th JFA; I've lost some of my zest for this mission now. We still do exceptional work but it is work. Today was a bit of a tooth biter. I got stung six times by wasps (left side back, 2 on back of right arm, three on right side of back) and man do they hurt. At least this time it wasn't like Ft. Lewis where I got stung on my head which is very painful. Didn't see their nest and they get you before you even see them. Welts all over now.

10 Nov, 0500 Hrs:

Today we have to get to the border and pickup the Vietnamese Delegation coming over for the next week. With luck we can find another couple sites by then. We are still shooting for our 5 site threshold and JFA average.

THICK LUCK

11 Nov, 1700 Hrs:

Today we went to a site where three witnesses were positive a guy is buried. We dug all afternoon and found nothing. Oh, well.

Hey, tomorrow is the 12th which is a good thing and means we are getting deep into this JFA. I still want to do good work and meet our five aircraft threshold but it is getting harder and harder as each day passes.

12 Nov, 1745 Hrs:

We have just gotten done with our meetings and today was a long, long, day. We were out in the heat and now as a whole we are smoked. The Satellite phone was forgotten in the back of the helicopter so I can't call tonight. I am so tired that may be a good thing because I wouldn't be much good for conversation.

We have to delay our move until the day after tomorrow because our witness thinks he is in the area of the crash we are looking for. Tomorrow I will jump off the skids, cut an LZ and we should be there. Checks in the mail. Heard that one before but it could be our second find of the JFA.

14 Nov, 2128 Hrs

It has been the longest of days and I have just made it back to my room after 'coordination' with the Lao officials. That equates to leaving dinner with the team and being nabbed as I walk by their table to share shots of Lao Lao and informally discuss all the issues at hand. The good thing is they genuinely trust and like me and MSG Collins which makes things soooo much easier for us.

15 Nov, 0546 Hrs

Today is the 15th and we are officially half way done and it needs to get over soon. I woke up at 0400 but couldn't drag

THICK LUCK

myself out of bed until now. I just stumbled to the desk and flipped on the computer and started writing. It is safe to say I am fricken tired.

16 Nov, 0900 Hrs

We are in the air and flying to Thakhek. It is a beautiful day and the flight is 1 hour and 40 minutes. I am taking advantage of the time to catch up on some report editing.

Last night we had our going away dinner with the Salavan Province officials and the head of the provincial army offered a toast to the American team. We then were obligated to take a toast of the moonshine in respect, etc. As it went around, we speculated what the meaty substance in the bottom of the bottle was (it was a plastic water bottle). We all agreed it was a chunk of a snake and some of the guys didn't take that news to well since they were already done drinking. Then the news got worse when the Lao told us it wasn't snake but goat balls from the goat they had killed for dinner. The theory being that goats breed all the time and the ball will add virility to whoever drinks it. There were a couple of unhappy folks.

24 Nov, 0630 Hrs:

I am just getting moving. Just got my coffee brewed and have to get ready for a big trek up the hill today. Should take us about 4 hours in and out which does not include the time at the site. I'd like to get done with this in time to run over to the site we have an appt for tomorrow. Potentially our 4th find and 3rd helicopter of the JFA. If we find that one this will be a monumental JFA. It will add up to 14 servicemen located in one JFA!!! Wish us luck for the next 48 hours.

THICK LUCK

24 Nov, 2100 Hrs:

We walked down a streambed today because our guide got lost. I knew where we were and was familiar with the area but because we were on the way out I walk towards the rear to make sure no one gets left behind. By the time I saw what had happened it was too late. We had gone off a ridgeline and into a stream. Moss covered slippery rocks. We all had our spills and I had two bad ones. The first fall I fell and went completely under and came up swimming. The Doc was laughing so hard he couldn't even walk for a while. The second was when I was giving our guide grief for getting us into that hole. My feet went out from under me and I went flat on my back into the rocks. Bounced of the rocks in a rapids and finally came up in a foul mood. It will be a Motrin night tonight.

26 Nov, 1900 Hrs:

Just got done with dinner. We had spaghetti night tonight. Everyone digs deep into their food boxes and dig out whatever is left to add to the sauce and make common dinner. It was pretty good and we had a beer together.

Today we surveyed two crash sites today. The last village we went to this old village chief made us come into his hut and he broke out the Lao Lao (rice moonshine). I had three full shots because I am the leader and the other guys had about the same. The chief also served wild pig jerky and boiled eggs and rice. It was pretty cool and the chief loved it.

27 Nov, 0610 Hrs:

Got up a few minutes ago because I stayed up late last night working on reports. Now, my first cup of coffee is brewed and I finished another bag of Starbuck's coffee. It is such an awesome treat out here; much thanks for getting it for me.

THICK LUCK

We are pushing ahead with two cases today, one tomorrow and one the next day and that will be the end. 22 of 22 cases investigated. At this point, 17 servicemen accounted for by this IE (16 for sure and 1 to be determined). It would be cool to find another before we leave but almost too much to hope for. I am so proud of what we have done. The last trip we found six crash sites and accounted for 6. This trip we found five and accounted for 17!

* * *

THICK LUCK

The search for the Jolly Green Giant was a long and arduous affair. On January 28, 1970, a HH-53 “Jolly Green Giant” helicopter was lost with six crewmembers on board. It had been in the process of aerial refueling, at an altitude of 7,000 feet, when a MiG fighter jet hit it with an air-to-air missile. The helicopter broke into two parts and crashed into the jungle along the Vietnam/Laos border.

The site was located in a remote mountainous region in northeastern Khammouan Province. The weather in that area was frequently cloudy and rainy. Any clear days brought gusting and swirling winds. It was extremely rugged with thick jungle canopy throughout. To complicate things, there were no villages within twelve miles of the record loss location and no natural clearings to use as a landing zone.

This search began on my first mission as Team Leader to Laos. We started by staging fuel barrels and pumps at the village twelve miles away. There was a small border post located there and we paid the guards to secure our fuel. From there we took the Squirrel and flew for hours over the area in an attempt to find a place to land and get the team on the ground near the record loss location.

Finally Bruce, a Kiwi bush pilot, spotted an opening in the trees at the junction of two large streams. He slowly descended the Squirrel under the upper canopy of branches. Then he carefully backed the bird under the trees to a sand bar on the edge of the stream. We jumped out with machetes and hatches and cleared the residue to create the best LZ we could muster. As long as he kept his tail boom over water, we were O.K. This LZ would serve us for the next three years.

The remainder of the team ferried in and then began a single file trek up the mountain to the north on a steep grade through the jungle. Within fifteen minutes we had two sick members

THICK LUCK

and were near mutiny. I brought Gunny Carabello to the front and told him to just keep bringing the team up the ridge until they got to flat ground. When they reached the top, they could take an extended rest stop. I would push ahead and walk the ridgeline to scout for wreckage. Gunny thought I expected too much from the team, but I felt the team needed to raise their game ... bring out their “A” game.

On the way up the hill, I found a small utility door that looked to be from a helicopter. That door was a bit of evidence that would both help and haunt us over the next three years. After surging up the hill, I started to walk the flat area of the large ridgeline. I hoped to find more wreckage or evidence of metal scavenging. It was normal for metal scavengers to pile the wreckage by the side of the trail to be picked up later.

After another 500 meters there was nothing but I decided to go just a bit further. It was at that time that I started thinking of my Long Range Surveillance Leader Course and how to avoid booby traps on the trails. I imagined being the point man of a recon team during the war and moving down this ridgeline. After cresting one last knoll, I stopped, turned around and intended to hustle back to the team. The team had just radioed informing he they had reached the top of the ridge.

After just two or three steps I fell to the ground, flat on my face. I tried to stand up but my foot was being pulled. After a closer look, I could see a cable around the center of my foot. It ran under a log and up into a tree. The tree had been bent over and was now trying to straighten back up. I had been snared!

I called on the radio and said, “*You won’t believe what just ...*”

Gunny’s’ voice cut in, “*break, break, Sir, Sammy just got caught in a trap!*”

I pulled the cable, got some slack, and removed it from my foot. It was pretty ingenious. The tree bent down, cable run

THICK LUCK

under the log, hooked on the stout stick, and looped around the hole. When a large animal (or me) came along, stepped in the hole, and broke the stick, the tree drew the loop around the foot or leg. It was far superior to anything I had done as a kid trapping back on the farm in Iowa.

I freed myself and ran down the ridge to the remainder of the team to see how they were doing. When I got back, Gunny told me the story. Apparently, Sammy got caught in a snare like I did and didn't know what was happening. He was on his backside and frantically trying to pull backward and screaming like a wounded animal. Another team member yelled at him that it was a trap. Master Sergeant Clifford thought they meant "trap" as in ambush. He started to run down the hill to get away. He explained later that if we were taken prisoner, someone had to get away to tell the story. Sammy was clearly shaken and the Lao officials were very concerned.

The officials had often warned of monkey traps that utilized a poison dart. When the monkey went for the bait, the dart would shoot into their flesh. When the monkey realized he had been hit with the poison, he would actually just sit and cry. Apparently, they could identify the poison and know they were going to die. The officials were serious in their fear and concern for these traps. I did not openly discount the existence of these type traps but also did not take them seriously.

After a short rest we got over the trap trauma and continued our search. We searched the eastern slope of that ridgeline for the next three days and found nothing to suggest the helicopter was nearby. It was a very rough search as the terrain consisted of deep vertical ravines covered by triple canopy jungle. It was extremely difficult to maintain a line search or navigate the side of the mountain.

We searched that ridge for many days over three JFAs to no avail. At that point, I had decided we needed to walk the

THICK LUCK

ridgelines in the area. Hopefully, we could locate a wreckage pile to let us know we were close. There were two more ridgelines, like the one we were on, within two kilometers to the west. That crash site was somewhere nearby.

In this case the whole investigation system came together to provide success. Interviews had taken place in Vietnam, which had identified a trapper who knew of a site on our side of the border. During my trip to Vietnam, I had the opportunity to talk with him. From his description I had sketched a map which had driven our search.

During that next JFA, we got lucky and the Vietnamese trapper came to Laos as part of a Tri-lateral investigation. He would lead us to the site if he could. During his interview he described the area where he had found a crash site and drew us a crude sketch. In his sketch he described the junction of two streams where he had camped and two very large trees nearby. I asked how big the trees were and he said two men could not put their arms around them. In those trees he had carved a likeness of Ho Chi Minh into one and a likeness of Lenin into the other—facing each other. He said from that location he could walk us to the site.

A few days later we had him in the Squirrel and we landed at the same stream junction we had used two years earlier. We walked him up to a small campsite we had seen there, and he said it was the spot. I was unconvinced and asked him where the trees were and the carvings. He walked me over to two trees and pointed. I looked at the trees and saw no carvings. I held up my hands as if to say, “Nothing here!” He smiled, grunted, and motioned for me to look on the other side. I pushed a big frond fern out of the way and there it was. I could make out the old curvature of the head and a pointy chin carved on the tree. It was a surreal moment that after two years we had been standing

THICK LUCK

right next to the biggest clue and never knew—like Indiana Jones looking for the Ark of the Covenant.

The next day the VN trapper led us up a ridge line and straight to the site. It was two ridgelines to the west and about four kilometers away. That was another *Holy Grail* and a huge success that involved all of JTF-FA from Hawaii, Vietnam, and Laos and the Lao and Vietnam POW/MIA contingents.

To our team's credit, we would have found it that JFA with or without him but it was no matter. We found the crash site, which consisted of burnt metal and wreckage spread over a large area. We recommended the site for excavation and knew the Excavation Team would have to do a wide search. It was the last Jolly Green Giant missing in SEA and hopefully the resulting excavation would get its crew back home.

* * *

The team experienced many hazards, including extremely difficult terrain, hot and humid temperatures, unexploded ordnance, spiders and leeches, and the unknown. On one investigation in Attapu province, we conducted an interview to find a jet crash site. A young man then offered to take us to the crash site of two helicopters on a nearby hill. We went there and were ecstatic to learn it was a site that had not been found. There had been a crewmember who could not get out of the aircraft before it burst into flames and we had found the right spot by chance. We inspected the site and collected aircraft parts numbers for evidence. I looked up, told Sammy not to move, and flicked a leech off his shirt. After I flicked another and another, I suggested we take a look around. The ground was moving with leeches!

We often discussed what made these leeches so hearty. No one could agree if they felt the vibration of you walking, sensed

THICK LUCK

your heat, or sensed your breath. Somehow they sensed your presence and actually walked toward you on the ground or jumped on you from the trees and bushes.

It became pretty much a standard operating procedure to tape around the top of our boots with duck tape to keep the leaches from getting in. Leaches could get in even the smallest openings in your clothes and they came from the ground or vegetation. In a case when we stopped to rest, we would only sit in one place for a couple minutes and then move again. Otherwise, the leaches would search you out.

On another occasion, Sammy and I were in an interview on a village chief's porch. Sammy stopped talking, started scratching his leg and jumped up. He dropped his pants right in the interview and out rolled a big fat green blood filled leech. The chief's wife just laughed and Sammy pulled up his pants and kept on talking. It was very common for a leech to unknowingly attach itself to you and fill itself up with blood and drop off later. There would be trails of blood in the aircraft as they tried to crawl away.

Up early for breakfast, I walked into the team room at a small hotel we were staying at and was taken aback. There, shirtless and bent over the table was our EOD technician. Doc stood over him from behind. I asked, "Uh, what's going on?" not really wanting to know. It turned out a big leech bite had been draining for days on the lower back of the technician. The Doc was trying to cauterize it with some acid - those leeches were bad.

* * *

THICK LUCK

We returned to the same village where I hurt my eye in 2001. On this second visit, we were to determine if there was more than one crash site in the area. In the mid-1990s, a team had visited the village and witnesses had reported a crash site with life support items. They couldn't approach the site due to all the UXO in the area which included cluster munitions and BLU-43 Dragon tooth anti-personnel mines. Therefore, they sent a villager into the site that came out with helmet parts. This report was not consistent with the report filed on my first trip. Now we were going back to determine if there were actually two sites and not just one.

We did our homework and received a class on the BLU-43. Apparently, it was an all-plastic air-scattered anti-personnel mine that was almost totally undetectable. It was green and smaller than the size of your hand with little wings.

We returned to the village and quizzed the village chief about the crash site on the edge of the village. He said it was the same site, but the village had done its own UXO removal. It wasn't very scientific, but they just picked the mines up and moved them out.

The team went back to the same area where I had hurt my eye a year earlier. It was now different because more brush had been cleared for pasture area. There were the cluster munitions again. As we searched, MSG Collins found a piece of parachute so I went over and we searched a small area near a tree. He kept following the line of the parachute and I started digging a bit further in that direction. I noticed that there was a little open area in the base of the tree. Cluster munitions were stacked in it to keep them out of the way.

As I dug, I found a survival knife blade and other items that the pilot would have been carrying. That was when another team member, I think MSG Collins said, "Hey! Look at this."

THICK LUCK

He started to throw his discovery as I started to say, “Don’t throw ...” and it was in the air.

There sailed a BLU-43 on its way to the Explosive Ordnance Expert’s outstretched hand. It was a moment that everything went into slow motion. The Expert went for it, thankfully caught it with no big bang and said, “Hey, that’s a BLU-43.”

After a piece of ordnance or wreckage goes through a crash, heat and thirty years in the ground, it just doesn’t look the same. You *always* had to be on your game. This mine looked like a bent tootsie roll the size of your little finger with the wings not pronounced. We were lucky.

The evidence we found on that survey correlated the crash site and indicated at least one crew member was in the aircraft at the time of impact. It was another success.

The riveting account of a US Army Ranger's odyssey to lead a team of investigative experts on a quest to bring home America's POWs and MIAs still missing from the secret war in Laos and Cambodia.

Thick Luck - The Search for America's POWs & MIAs

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2593.html?s=pdf>