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REPORT

RESCUE AT BAN PHANOP

5 - 7 DECEMBER 1969 (U)

15 FEBRUARY 1970

APPROVED FOR
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HQ PACAF

Directorate, Tactical Evaluation
CHECO Division

Prepared by:

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Project CHECO 7th AF, DOAC

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PROJECT CHECO REPORTS

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in the employment of USAF airpower to meet a multitude of requirements. The varied applications of airpower have involved the full spectrum of USAF aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, there has been an accumulation of operational data and experiences that, as a priority, must be collected, documented, and analyzed as to current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity that would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction, and would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet this Air Staff requirement. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements at Hq 7AF and 7AF/13AF, Project CHECO provides a scholarly, "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. Along with the other CHECO publications, this is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM.



MILTON B. ADAMS, Major General, USAF
Chief of Staff

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- (2) AIR FORCES
 - (a) 2AF(DICS). 1
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- (a) 5AF(DOPP) 1
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- (c) 7AF
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 - 2. DPL. 1
- (e) 7/13AF(CHECO) 1

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- (a) 313AD(DOI) 1
- (b) 314AD(DOP) 2
- (c) 327AD
 - 1. DO 1
 - 2. DI 1
- (d) 834AD(DO) 2

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(4) WINGS

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1. USAFE

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(c) OOT	1
(d) XDC	1

(2) AIR FORCES

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(b) 16AF(ODC)	2
(c) 17AF	
1. ODC	1
2. OID	1

(3) WINGS

(a) 20TFW(DCOI)	1
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CHAPTER I

5 DECEMBER 1969

The largest search and rescue (SAR) operation of the Vietnam conflict to date began at 0900 hours* on the morning of 5 December 1969 when two Phantom jets (Boxer 21/22) took off from Cam Ranh Bay Air Base and headed north to refuel at the yellow anchor south of Da Nang. Their mission was to emplace MK-36 antipersonnel mines along a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos which, since the advent of the dry season a month earlier, had come alive with southbound traffic. The F-4Cs refueled and headed west toward their preplanned target in central Laos. When they were unable to contact a Forward Air Controller (FAC), they were diverted northward to a target near Ban Phanop, 10 miles below Mu Gia Pass, a major entry to the trail from North Vietnam. (Fig. 1.)

After a briefing by the Nail FAC, the Phantoms began their runs. Boxer 21 made the first run successfully. Boxer 22 followed, but at the bottom of the dive, after releasing ordnance, the aircraft was hit by ground fire and the pilot, Capt. Benjamin Danielson, and the navigator, Lt. Woodrow Bergeron, Jr., ejected. Lieutenant Bergeron said:^{1/}

"The windblast knocked my helmet off and got my nose. The chutes were fairly close. As I was coming down, there was a guy shooting at me with a 12.7....When I got on the ground, the shots were ricocheting over my head on top of the ground. I happened to land right at the edge of the river in a little cleared area about ten by ten. I hit the ground running. My chute was stuck in a ten-foot high bush. Ben's (across the river) was in about a forty-foot tree."

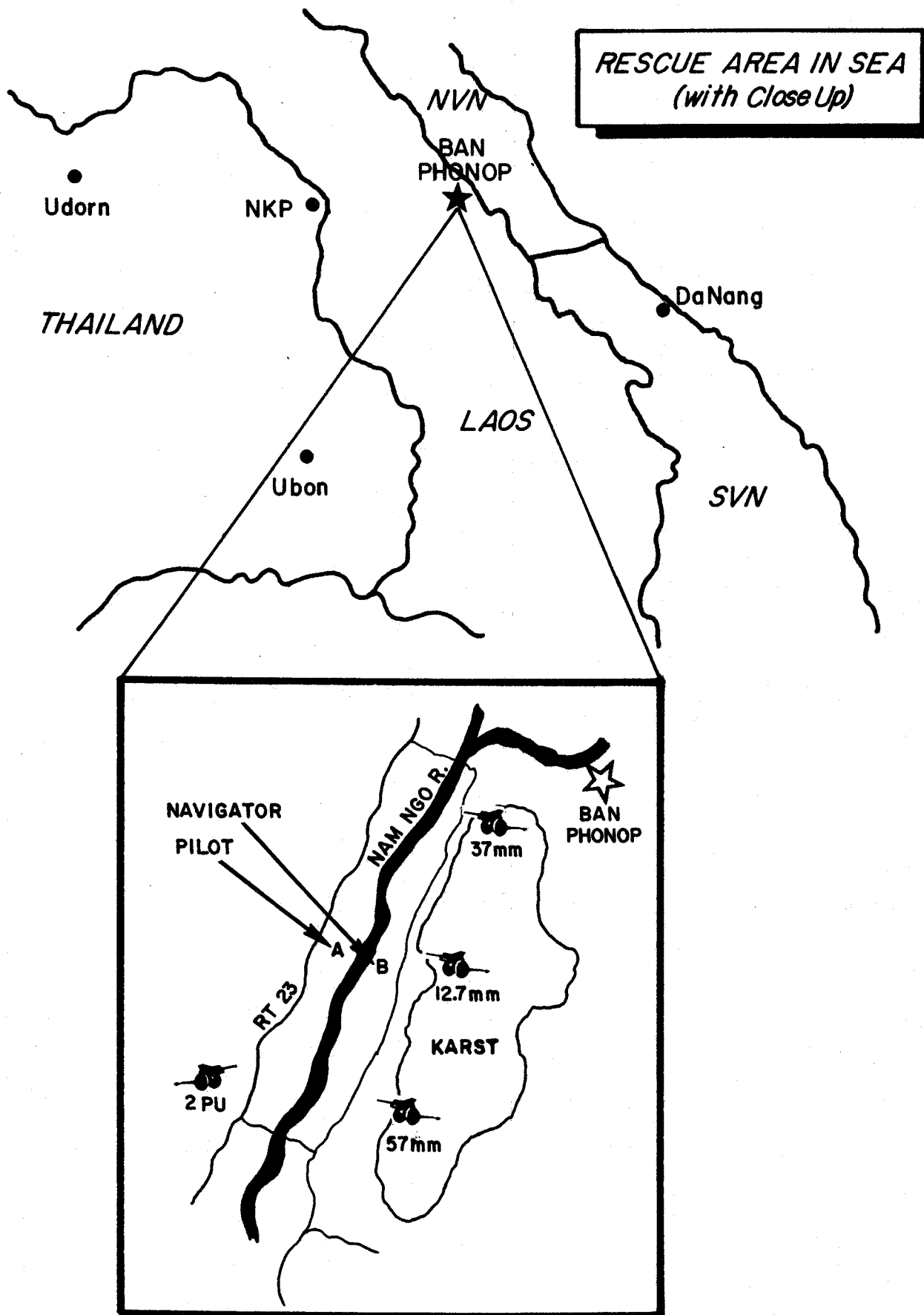
* All times are local Laos/Thailand.

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The Mayday and chute beepers were picked up by the King HC-130 rescue aircraft which was flying its normal orbit north of Nakhon Phanom (NKP), approximately 60 miles to the west of the bailout area. During a SAR operation, the responsibility of King was to orbit high over the rescue area (24,000 ft.) and act as strategic overseer of the effort by providing a communications platform, controlling incoming and outgoing aircraft, and coordinating refueling operations. Radio contact with the Nail FAC confirmed that two good chutes had been seen and that a bona fide SAR operation existed. Nail told King the survivors were on relatively flat ground at an altitude of 600 feet, they were in good condition, and the weather over the area was clear. Based on this information, King contacted NKP and Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) to scramble two Sandy A-1s, two Jolly Green rescue helicopters, and a second King aircraft for refueling. King then headed for the SAR area for what appeared at the time to be a normal rescue operation.^{2/}

The Sandy aircraft, 01 and 02, and King arrived at the scene almost simultaneously at eleven o'clock. Sandy 01 took over command from the Nail FAC and contacted the survivors. From them, he learned the pilot had landed in a work area on the west side of the Nam Ngo River, between it and Route 23 (Fig. 1). There were telephone poles lying on the ground, an outhouse, and well-worn paths leading to the river. The navigator was at the river's edge on the east side, and behind him was a 20-foot high embankment which shielded him from the ground above. Three hundred meters behind him rose a 1,200-foot karst which extended to the north. The river was 50 feet wide and the two air-^{3/}men were about 70 feet apart (Fig. 2). There was small arms fire on the west side--the east bank was quiet.

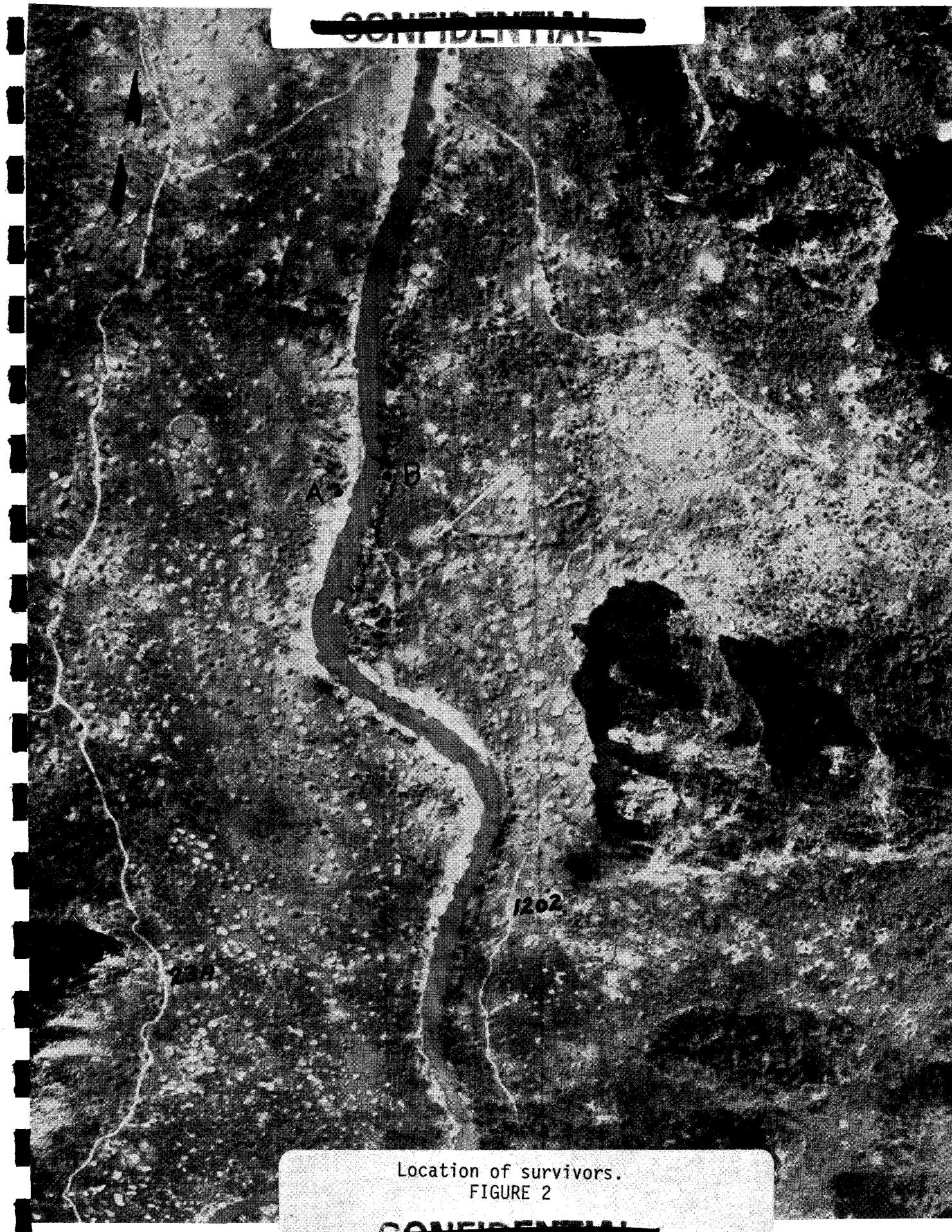
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FIGURE 1

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Location of survivors.
FIGURE 2

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By 1120 hours, a flight of A-1s carrying antipersonnel ordnance arrived and, supplemented by F-100s and F-105s which were in the area, began the first step of the rescue operation--suppression of the ground fire. For an hour and twenty minutes, the A-1s raked the valley floor, while the jets struck against the larger guns to the north. Two Jolly Green helicopters, which arrived just as this operation began, were held in orbit southeast of the downed air-men's position. Both survivors were talking with Sandy and giving him information on the location and intensity of the ground fire.

During this hosing down operation, reports increased of heavy antiaircraft fire from both sides of the river, the heaviest coming from the karst on the east side. It was soon apparent that the ground threat was greater than was originally thought and that aircraft flying down the valley were being caught in a crossfire. Particularly troublesome was a 37-mm gun located in a cave at the foot of the karst 300 meters directly behind the navigator. Additional air support was requested. Six A-1s loaded with CBU 19/30 (riot control agents) were launched from Da Nang AB; two large Jolly Green helicopters took off from NKP and were replaced there in airborne alert by two more from Udorn RTAFB; and four F-4s departed from Ubon RTAFB carrying Paveway laser-guided bombs for use against the 37-mm gun.^{4/}

By 1240 hours, the ground fire had died down sufficiently to attempt a pickup. It was decided to attempt rescuing the pilot first, since the west side of the river was flatter and was the scene of the greatest ground activity. The first Jolly Green got to within two minutes of the survivor when intense ground fire forced him out of the area. After another 20 minutes of airstrikes,

[REDACTED]

a second helicopter went in for the pickup, but became disoriented coming around the karst; it was driven out of the area by gunfire. While trying to maneuver away, the pilot overboosted his engines and had to return to NKP.^{5/}

Four more attempts before dark failed to extract the pilot. Each time a Jolly Green moved in, it was driven away by gunfire. Between rescue attempts, the valley was sprayed with ordnance and CBU-19. During a descent at 1400 hours, a Jolly Green was hit by ground fire and the Pararescue Jumper (PJ) aboard was wounded. He died en route to NKP. At 1530 hours, another helicopter came close to the survivor but was forced to exit when it took a hit in the rotor blades. An hour later, a Paveway bomb was delivered at the 37-mm gun but it hit long. After the failure of a pickup attempt at 1750 hours, Sandy 07 informed the survivors that it was becoming too dark to continue the operation and that it would resume with first light the following morning.^{6/} A message from Udorn, instructing the survivors to inflate their Mae Wests after dark, cover themselves with branches and leaves, and float southward down the river, was never received by the airmen.^{7/}

As stated by Lt. Woodrow Bergeron, Jr.:^{8/}

"I couldn't have done it anyway because...at night they had a ford south of us and they'd light flares to get a winch going to get the trucks across and with the flares lighting the river it was like a mirror. And also just right south down the river it turned sandy where the ford was. I'd have had to walk again. The way Sandy felt about it, they were going to have to pound this particular area and they were already pounding it and if we got any farther south they were going to have to do the same thing all over again."

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Neither survivor slept the first night. They kept in radio contact with each other, but since the enemy continued his search through the bushes on the west bank, the pilot seldom came up on guard channel. Lieutenant Bergeron remained hidden in a clump of bamboo to which he had run when he landed.

[REDACTED]

CHAPTER II

6 DECEMBER 1969

The rescue armada, composed of the King HC-130, four Jolly Green helicopters, 12 A-1s, and a number of jets, was back on the scene at 0600 hours of the second day.^{1/} Contact was made with Lieutenant Bergeron (but not with the pilot), who informed Sandy that throughout the night he had heard enemy soldiers rooting through the bushes on the other side of the river looking for the pilot, but that as yet no one had appeared on his side. He was told to take cover for the next few hours as Sandy was going to put all his aircraft into the valley to hose it down. An hour later, the navigator told Sandy he had just heard excited voices across the river, followed by a long burst of automatic weapons fire and a scream from the pilot.^{2/}

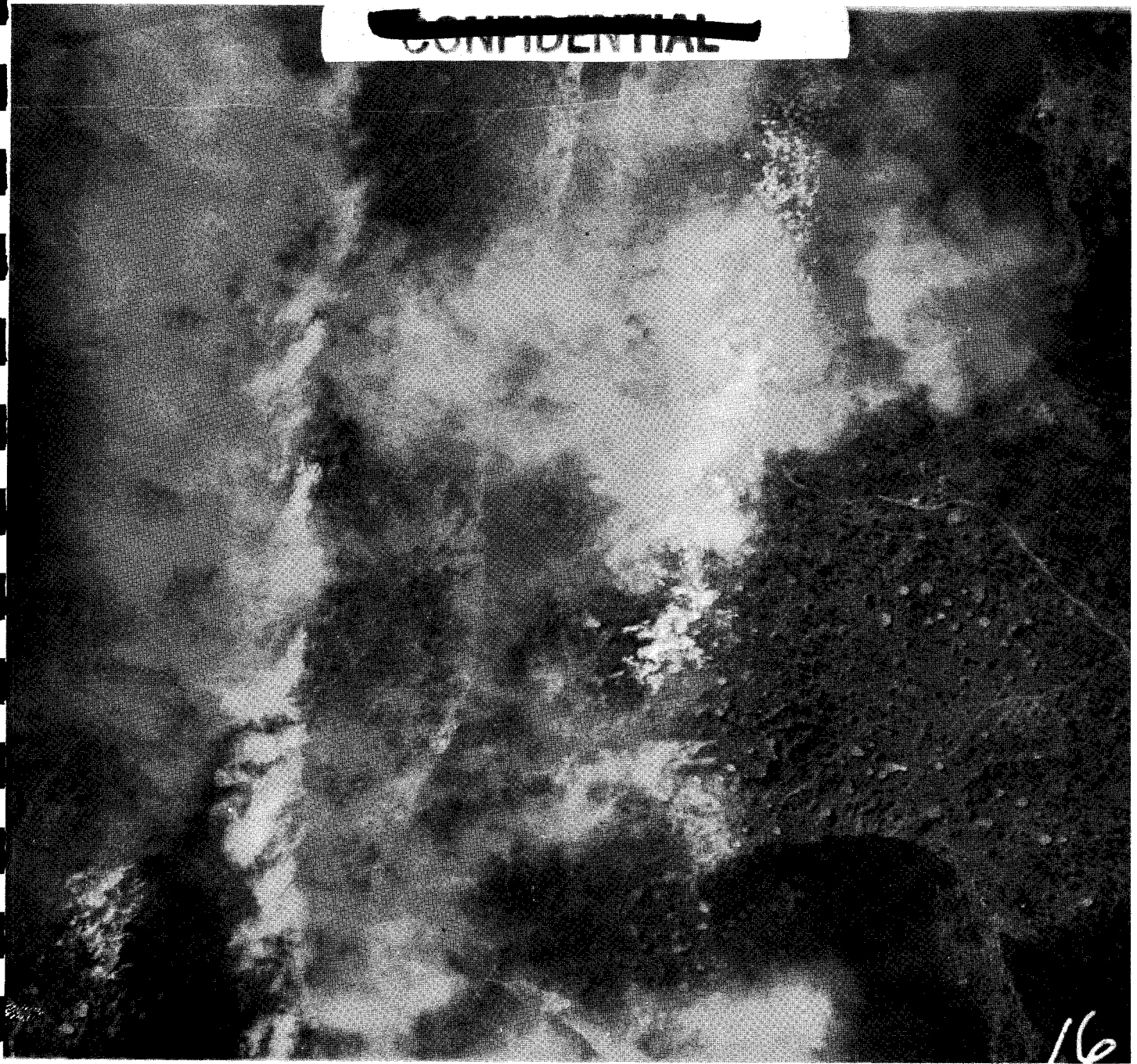
For five hours, the valley was strafed and bombed by A-1s and jets, as the navigator remained concealed in the bamboo thicket, directing the strikes.

"Everytime I'd hear somebody talking I'd just put a strike in on their voices. (I was) sitting out there being a FAC. When I'd hear somebody talking I'd take out the compass and try to get the heading and try to guess how far it was."

Once during the morning, two soldiers entered the river on the west side, apparently trying to cross over. A radio call from the survivor brought a jet which strafed the edge of the river with 20-mm fire and "the guys physically disappeared."

Intelligence reports indicated the enemy was moving men and equipment into

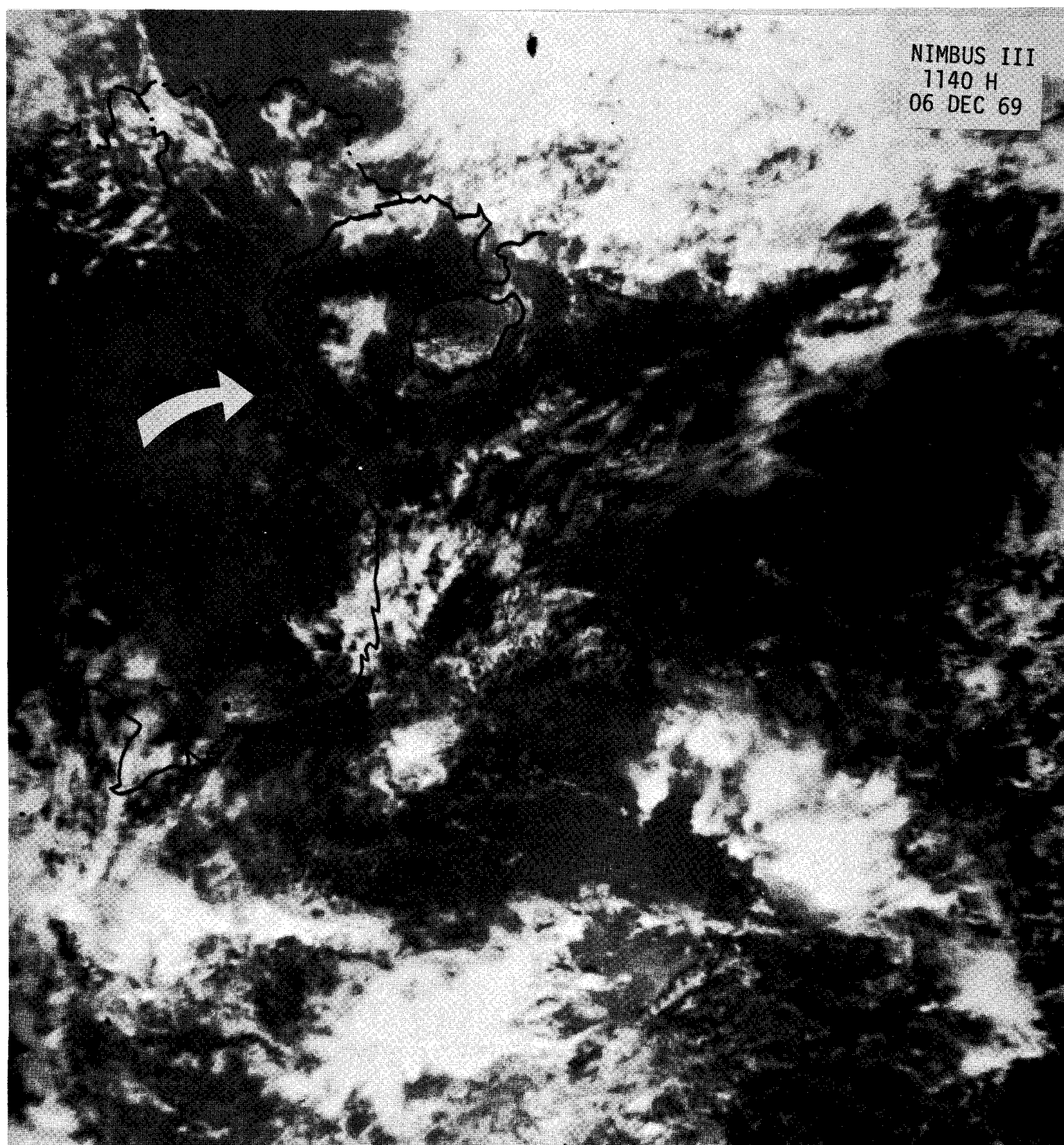
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Smoke walls appear on either side of Nam Ngo
River with CBU-19 visible on east side.
FIGURE 3

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A white wisp of smoke (arrow) appears over the rescue scene in this satellite photo taken on the second day.

FIGURE 4

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the area and suggested the downed airman was being used as bait--an enemy tactic not unknown in past SAR operations. The air response to this was to build a smoke corridor--a tactic that at one time had been used frequently in SEA but had fallen into disuse during the past year.^{3/} Using CBU-22 incendiary and smoke munitions, two walls of smoke were built up, one on each side of the river, to shield the helicopters from ground fire from the valley walls as they came in for the pickup (Fig. 3). Throughout the morning, the walls were built. "As soon as you turned out of the traffic at NKP," said one of the A-1 pilots, "you could see the smoke. At 5,000 feet, it looked like a Texas sand-storm."^{4/} The smoke appeared as a small white wisp on a satellite photo taken by Nimbus III which passed over the area shortly before noon (Fig. 4).

The smoke was supplemented by nonlethal riot control agents (CBU-19, CBU-30, and BLU-52) which were dropped along the top of the ridge behind the survivor to seal him off from any enemy troops to the east. (Fig. 3). In describing the situation, Lieutenant Bergeron stated:^{5/}

"They laid it all along the top of the ridge...[some of] it hit me...I might as well tell you what it feels like when that stuff goes off. I ran into a tree and was wrapped around the tree urinating, defecating, and retching all at the same instant...It also made me want to sneeze. It was a beauty to have 500 pounders and everything go off because it would give me a chance to sneeze...It goes into effect instantaneously. Physically and mentally you can't control yourself...After that everytime I'd come up on the air and ask for Vodka (A-1s carrying CBU-19), as soon as I'd tell them where, how far and the heading, I'd tell them 'Don't get it close to me.'"

Later, Lieutenant Bergeron said the enemy gunners appeared to be unaffected by the agent since they continued to fire. He surmised they had gas masks.

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However, later in the day, a PJ aboard one of the rescue helicopters reported some enemy soldiers had climbed into the trees to escape the effects of the CBU-19. Sandy called in strafing passes at treetop level to dislodge them.^{6/}

By noon, the valley was quiet and the first Jolly Green moved in for the pickup but was driven out by ground fire before it could reach the survivor. Ten minutes later, a second helicopter got within 50 yards of the survivor, but was hit and left the scene with severe tail vibrations. The enemy was using a familiar tactic--lying low during the hosing down operation and saving his fire for the slower and more vulnerable Jolly Greens.

The helicopter, which made a third try about 1415 hours, hovered four feet above the ground on top of the ridge behind Lieutenant Bergeron, but the crew could not see him over the hill. He began to climb up the seven-foot high sheer wall "going like a cat up this bank," but just as he got his fingers on top of the shelf, about six feet from the aircraft's door, the Jolly Green had to leave.^{7/}

On the fourth attempt, two hours later, the helicopter became disoriented coming through the wall of smoke--when it came into the clear, it was on the wrong side of the river. During the last two attempts late in the day, the lieutenant remained on top of the embankment, but ground fire kept both helicopters from approaching close enough to drop the penetrator.^{8/}

Between rescue attempts, the A-1s rebuilt the smoke walls while the jets used air-to-ground missiles against the heavier guns. Walleye and Bullpup missiles struck the guns to the north. Paveways were delivered against the gun

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in the cave behind the survivor. "When the Paveways would hit," recalled the lieutenant later, "it would physically throw me in the air about two inches-- a beautiful feeling." Although the bombs brought down part of the karst in front of the cave, the enemy moved the gun out and set it up in another cave about 20 feet away. It was not silenced until the third day.

A total of 154 sorties were flown on this second day (App. I). The enormous size of the operation and the relatively narrow operating space created some confusion. As more aircraft joined the effort throughout the day, the airways became filled with chatter as the pilots flew, at times almost in trail, into the river valley. "It was a miracle," said the King aircraft commander, "that we didn't have a mid-air collision."^{9/} Both a Jolly Green and a Shotgun A-1 declared a Mayday when they were hit by ground fire, but their calls were lost in the chatter.^{10/}

It had been 11 months since a SAR effort of such proportions had taken place,^{11/} and few airmen remained in the theater with experience in such a gigantic undertaking. Jolly Greens frequently overshot the survivor^{12/} and Sandy aircraft often found it difficult to give detailed instructions through the noise. Several Jolly Greens returned to Nakhon Phanom unescorted. With A-1s being loaded with ordnance for turnaround and both damaged helicopters having returned from the scene, the ramps and loading space at NKP were filled with aircraft. A request during the afternoon for additional CBU-22 smoke aircraft was not filled for several hours.^{13/} Refueling facilities at the base were also overtaxed, resulting in a delay in refueling the King HC-130.^{14/}

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The SAR effort was halted at 1800 hours on the second day. The last pickup attempt, 15 minutes earlier, had been made too late in the day to allow Lieutenant Bergeron to return to the bamboo thicket where he had been hiding for two days. Instead, he ran to a tree about 40 feet north and began to dig into its root structure. By so doing, he left behind his seat kit with most of his survival equipment but this also probably saved his life. About 15 minutes after dark, three soldiers came over the hill and from a distance of about 25 feet gassed the bamboo thicket where he had been with an unexpended can of CBU-19. They then fired into the clump with automatic weapons. After they left, the lieutenant continued digging into the tree but lost his .38 in the roots. He tried to swim the river but was too tired. While in the river he noticed a large, fairly well-leafed bush overhanging the river a short distance north. He swam to it and, with his feet in the water, hid under it. This bush remained his hiding place until he was rescued.

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CHAPTER III

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By the third day, both sides were well-organized for the effort. "It got to be a personal thing between the (enemy) individuals on the ground and us," said the NKP squadron commander later.^{1/} A three-hour hosing down operation got under way at first light. Jets were fraggged into the area and the remaining heavy guns were knocked out. Enemy soldiers came within 25 feet of the survivor but soft ordnance and CBU-30 kept them at bay.

The first pickup attempt was made at 0850 hours. The area around the survivor was so saturated with smoke, however, that the Jolly Green pilot could not find him. The angle of the sun and the density of the smoke created instrument flight rules (IFR) conditions which forced the helicopter to leave the area. The pilot reported that during this attempt he received heavy ground fire from the vicinity of a camouflaged truck near the survivor. He also reported heavy defenses northwest of the survivor, including 500-1,000 men in an open area.^{2/}

For three more hours, the area was sanitized with smoke, CBU-30, and ordnance. By 1140 hours, the armada was formed for another attempt. Ten A-1s formed a daisy chain on the west side of the river and 12 others set one up on the east side. The Jolly Green began its descent on the east side with A-1s circling above and around it, using their ordnance to form a protective ring around the survivor. Lieutenant Bergeron dashed out into the river waving the only white object he had--his escape and evasion chart. The helicopter overshoot him, did a 360° turn, backed up, and lowered the penetrator. It landed

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in the water four feet from the navigator and he was hoisted aboard. There was no appreciable gunfire. "They were all either dead or had given up,"^{3/} commented a member of the rescue party.

Much of the success of this SAR effort was due to two factors: (1) the calmness of the survivor; and (2) the ability of the SAR forces to adapt to the situation and to relearn some lessons that had been forgotten through disuse. According to a Sandy pilot of the third day, Lt. Bergeron's calmness kept everyone from panicking. Each night, instead of saying "Come and get me," he'd say, "Good night, see you in the morning." He even brought back a water sample from the river from which he had drunk, so the doctor might analyze it.^{4/}

The use of the smoke corridor was a key element in the rescue. On the third day, nearly all of the problems of the first two days were solved. The intercom chatter was cut down when Sandy assigned working frequencies to each group of aircraft with their respective Nail FAC and kept Victor as a common frequency.^{5/} By the third day, the 56th Special Operations Wing (SOW) at NKP was completely geared for the operation. There was enough of the right kind of ordnance and the loading progressed smoothly. "I asked my ordnance people how long it would take to load smoke," noted the Special Operations Squadron (SOS) commander. "They told me 'An hour and a half.' I told them I needed it in an hour. They gave it to me in fifty minutes."^{6/} The King commander organized a highly efficient shuttle system for channeling aircraft in and out of the rescue area. "He helped me by keeping me informed about ordnance coming on station," remarked the Sandy pilot afterward.^{7/}

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A total of 336 sorties participated in the rescue (App. I), and 21 different types of ordnance were used, ranging from 20-mm cannon fire to air-to-ground missiles (App. II). Ten helicopters and five A-1s suffered battle damage. This episode illustrates that no two rescue operations are identical and success depends upon rapid adaptability to the location, terrain, and enemy tactics. For the survivor, it was an indication of the amount of effort that would be expended to save a downed crewmember. For the units involved, "it was the greatest training exercise yet of the war--for both sides."^{8/}

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FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

1. (S) Interview, Lt Woodrow Bergeron, Jr., Cam Ranh Bay AB, RVN, 12 Dec 69. (Hereafter cited: Bergeron Interview.)
2. (S) Interview, Lt Col William P. Reece, King Airborne Mission Commander, Tuy Hoa AB, 13 Dec 69. (Hereafter cited: Reece Interview.)
3. (S) Bergeron Interview.
4. (S) Log, Hq 7AF, DOCC (Blue Chip). (Hereafter cited: Blue Chip Log.)
5. (S) Mission Narrative Summary, King 1, 39th ARRS, 5 Dec 69;
(S) Blue Chip Log.
6. Ibid.
7. (S) Mission Narrative Summary, King 6, 39th ARRS, 5 Dec 69;
(S) Bergeron Interview.
8. (S) Bergeron Interview.

CHAPTER II

1. (S) Blue Chip Log.
2. (S) Bergeron Interview.
3. (S) Reece Interview.
4. (S) Interview, Lt Col A. S. Martin, Comdr, 22d SOS, NKP, 22 Dec 69.
(Hereafter cited: Martin Interview.)
5. (S) Bergeron Interview.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. (S) Mission Narrative Summary, King 2, 39th ARRS, 6 Dec 69.
9. (S) Reece Interview.
10. (S) Mission Narrative Summary, King 3, 39th ARRS, 5 Dec 69.

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11. (S) CHECO Rprt, Hq PACAF, DOTEK, "USAF Search and Rescue, Nov 67-Jun 69," 30 Jul 69, pp 42-46.
 12. (S) Martin Interview.
 13. (S) Mission Narrative Summary, King 2, 39th ARRS, 6 Dec 69.
 14. (S) Mission Narrative Summary, King 3, 39th ARRS, 5 Dec 69.

CHAPTER III

1. (S) Martin Interview.
2. (S) Mission Narrative Summary, King 4, 39th ARRS, 7 Dec 69.
3. (S) Martin Interview.
4. (S) Interview, Maj Thomas E. Dayton (Sandy Lead, 3d Day), NKP, 22 Dec 69. (Hereafter cited: Dayton Interview.)
5. (S) Martin Interview.
6. (S) Dayton Interview.
7. Ibid.
8. (S) Martin Interview.

APPENDIX I

SORTIES IN SUPPORT OF BOXER 22 SAR

	<u>5 DEC</u>	<u>6 DEC</u>	<u>7 DEC</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
1. Jet Strike				
F-105	12	20	18	50
F-100	2	2	0	4
F-4	4	22	8	34
A-6	0	4	0	4
A-7	0	2	0	2
2. Wolf FACS (F-4s/8th TFW Ubon RTAFB)	3	3	3	9
3. A-1 (56th SOW, NKP)	50	74	48	172
4. Nail FACS (56th SOW, NKP)	7	11	7	25
5. Helicopters	9	11	4	24
6. King HC-130	<u>3</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>12</u>
TOTAL	90	154	92	336

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APPENDIX II
ORDNANCE EXPENDED IN SUPPORT OF BOXER 22 SAR

<u>TYPE</u>	<u>5 DEC</u>	<u>6 DEC</u>	<u>7 DEC</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
AGM-12c(Bullpup)	0	2	0	2
AGM-62(Walleye)	0	2	0	2
BLU-23	0	16	0	16
BLU-27	18	16	0	34
BLU-32	8	0	0	8
BLU-52	0	6	10	16
CBU-14	136	264	44	444
CBU-19	0	19	0	19
CBU-22	4	98	0	102
CBU-24	8	50	15	73
CBU-25	2	4	0	6
CBU-30	24	55	4	83
CBU-40	0	0	4	4
KMU-351(Paveway)	0	12	4	16
LAU-3	33	41	10	84
LAU-59(WP)	4	3	0	7
M-47	21	19	74	114
M-117	8	4	0	12
MK-82	78	232	111	421
				<u>1,463</u>