

Pilots' Tense Drama Ends 'Beautifully'

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UBON RTAFB, Thailand (Special) — If the adage is true that a man's home is where he hangs his hat, then two Wolfpack F4 Phantom crew members are proud to refute Thomas Wolfe's classic, "You can't go home again."

They returned from hostile territory where they ejected after their aircraft was set ablaze by enemy fire. The two, Maj. Jerry Cox and Capt. Wade "Mother" Hubbard, are both assigned to the 308th Tactical Fighter Sq.

The two Phantom crew members were flying strikes against lines of communications used by enemy insurgents to haul badly needed supplies to continue their assault against Cambodian government troops.

"We had already struck our target and were taking one last look before moving on up the road to work another area," Cox related from his hospital bed, where he was recovering from minor wounds received in the fire and subsequent ejection.

"We felt an abrupt thump underneath the aircraft and dense gray smoke started to fill the cockpit. We didn't see it at this point because I still had control of the aircraft."

Hubbard said the smoke began seeping into the backseat.

"The aircraft seemed to jump a few feet into the air. Cox turned the aircraft back toward more friendly territory west of the Mekong River and headed home."

"Systems began failing immediately," Cox recounted. "When I stepped on the rudders there was no response, just a mushy feeling. Smoke was getting thicker and flames were flickering up around my right ankle. I knew we had to get out."

"I told Hubbard we would have to punch out," Cox said.

Then suddenly Hubbard felt himself being hurled gently through the air.

"It seemed as though I was tumbling over and over," Hubbard recalled. "I didn't doubt the ejection seat's capability but since I didn't know how high up I was, I was ready to pull the manual rip cord to rid myself of the seat. Fortunately the seat and I agreed on the proper altitude and the next thing I knew I was floating gently toward the ground. It was a relief to stop tumbling and swinging around the sky like a huge pendulum," he recalled.

Cox attempted to activate his ejection system but nothing happened.



USAF Photo by Sgt. Robert Smith

HUBBARD IS WELCOMED HOME BY A FRIEND AFTER THE ORDEAL.

"I had a hell of a fire burning all around me. I hit the canopy jettison and . . . nothing. I reached through the fire with my right hand and tried the canopy manual unlock handle. I took both hands and pushed as hard as I could on the canopy and suddenly I found myself whipping through the air. I had ejected right up through the flames."

Hubbard was the first to reach the ground. He came to rest about eight feet above the ground with his chute tangled in the tree limbs.

"I gave a couple of jerks to be sure the chute was firm before using my tree lowering device, but each jump brought me a couple of feet closer to the ground. Soon I was able to release my harness."

Cox, meanwhile, had landed in trees and found himself suspended some 30 feet above the ground. While Hubbard was getting his survival radios activated again, Cox was faced with lowering himself to the ground.

"All of a sudden, I tumbled to the ground, injuring my feet, legs and back. In fact I thought my back was broken and it was all over," Cox recalled. "But soon I was able to get up on my knees and then walk a little."

By now the sky was filled with aircraft as the search for the men became more concentrated. Both men maintained radio contact with rescue forces and soon their positions were pinpointed.

Cox suffered a broken bone low in his back, third, second, and first degree burns on his right leg and arm and minor burns and lacerations on his face. Hubbard had a piece of bone chipped from his shoulder and other minor lacerations.

When the huge Jolly Green Gi-

ant rescue helicopter hovered for pickup, a pararescue medic went down for the rescue.

Hubbard greeted his rescuer with, "You are beautiful!" and he hugged him. Nearly two hours had been spent on the ground and nobody knew if enemy soldiers were nearby or not.

This mission will remain in their memory forever, but as Hubbard cracked, "We still have the other half of the round-trip ticket. Where do we collect?"