

Jon Harris

The *USS Independence* with Air Wing 7, including my new squadron, VA-72 (A-4E's) arrived at Yankee Station on July 1st, 1965, just in time for Independence Day. On my 63rd combat mission (ironically enough) on September 20, 1965, I joined six other pilots and crewmen having being shot down over the North. Two air force pilots (including the one captured by the Chinese and held in their prison until February 12, 1973) and the entire four man crew of a rescue helicopter looking for the other pilot, were captured and held as POWs for seven and a half years.

The Alpha Strike I was on that day was the first major strike into Hanoi, meant to destroy a bridge running to the north as the major supply route from China. My plane was hit during the engagement, and I was forced to eject about halfway to the coast. Having been told that there was a rescue helo aboard a cruiser off the coast, I found an extraction position halfway up a mountain hiding in elephant grass, where I could see a village below, but would be able to be picked up if the helo came my way. After a couple of hours of praying and hoping, it *did* come my way, circled around behind the mountain (to dump my weight of fuel), was shot at by the bad guys causing the RESCAP A-1 pilot to strafe that area and quiet them down, and came to a hover while it let down the horse collar. As it began to ratchet me up, the helo had to turn out over the valley to gain airspeed, and I was dangling 500 feet or more from *terra firma*. Finally in the helo, we began taking taking antiaircraft fire as we approached the coast south of Haiphong. One blast was close enough to unbalance the rotor blades, and the pilot had to continually press (what he later told me was) the "self-balancing" button...so it was a rough ride to the cruiser...which

was at flank speed the entire two hours of the rescue heading directly toward the coast so that the helo would have enough fuel to make it back.

It was later reported in the book, *Alpha Strike Vietnam*, by Jeffrey L. Levinson, that this was the first recovery of a pilot shot down over North Vietnam. Knowing how many friends, squadron-mates, shipmates, and classmates endured such interminable and horrendous experiences as POWs, there has always been a lingering sense of survivor's guilt mixed with the exultation of the moment and the recognition over the years that somehow those others on that day punched my ticket and let me get home. I have never forgotten.

Fittingly enough, the *Independence* departed Yankee Station for our homeward trek on Veteran's Day, November 11, 1965.