

The first combat rescue made by a helicopter, was undertaken after an L-1B, carrying three British soldiers, had come down some 100 miles behind enemy lines in Burma after being hit by groundfire on April 21, 1944. As the closest Allied base was the Aberdeen glider airstrip and with dense jungle and Japanese troops nearby, a ground rescue attempt or the use of fixed-wing rescue aircraft was considered impractical. It was therefore decided to use one of the untried YR-4Bs. To conduct the attempt, the two-seat helicopter was ferried from its base at Lalaghat to a forward base at Taro and on to Aberdeen along a circuitous 500-mile route, most of which was over Japanese occupied territory. Refuelling stops were made every 100 miles or so at locations controlled by Wingates raiders. Finally, on **April 25, 1944** three days after the L-1B had been forced down, Lt Harman flew his YR-4B from Aberdeen to a clearing near the crash site, a distance of approximately 60 miles and picked up the first of the British wounded.



L-1B



YR-4B

With his YR-4B struggling in the heat to get airborne with the added weight, Harman made it to an emergency strip prepared by British commandos on a sandbar ten miles away. There the wounded soldier was transferred to a Stinson L-5B which had brought fuel for the helicopter. Harman then returned to the clearing and brought back another wounded soldier. However, an overheating engine forced him to remain overnight on the sandbar. The next morning, he went back for the third British soldier and later in the morning had what appeared to be a narrow escape as he picked up the pilot. However, the “threatening troops” seen by Lt Harman turned out to be members of a Chindit rescue party which had made its way overland to come to the rescue of the downed flyers. Before succumbing to lack of spare parts and harsh weather in the Burmese jungle, the last two YR-4Bs of the 1st Air Commando Group were credited with a total of 15 successful evacuations.

Igor Sikorsky's R-4 Helicopter

The R-4 was the first helicopter to reach operational status in US military service, to make a combat rescue, to be used in saving a civilian life, and to operate from ship's decks. Yet, among the more than 299,000 American aircraft built during World War Two for US and Allied Forces, the 133 R-4s built between 1942 and 1945 deserve a special place in the annals of aviation.





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AIR FORCE HEROES

Harman: A helo hero

In World War II, second lieutenant made history with first helicopter combat rescue

By Robert F. Dorr
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

When 2nd Lt. Carter Harman pulled off history's first helicopter combat rescue in Burma in 1944, he was a 25-year-old pilot at the controls of a new kind of flying machine.

"Most people had never seen a helicopter before," said Harman during interviews in 2002 and 2003. "Once in a while, somebody would walk up to it and ask, 'What is it?'"

The Air Force History Office and Helicopter Foundation International recognize Harman for completing the first helicopter combat rescue.

Germany and the United States operated small numbers of helicopters during World War II. The Germans used theirs primarily for maritime reconnaissance.

The American craft was the Sikorsky R-4B, a box-shaped machine with a 180-horsepower engine and a 38-foot main rotor. "Awkward looking R-4 was pioneer among helos," Air Force Times, Aug. 18.

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1918, Harman grew up in New Jersey. He was briefly a music journalist for the New York Times and a student civilian pilot before the war.

He entered pilot training in March 1943 in Flying Class 43-C.

"I had no particular opinion about helicopters," Harman said.

He took an assignment at the Sikorsky plant in Bridgeport, Conn., because it was close to his home. In 1943, Harman was



COURTESY OF HARMAN FAMILY

Carter Harman as a second lieutenant, circa 1944.

among a dozen pilots and maintainers to receive R-4B training from the manufacturer.

The journey from Bridgeport to Burma happened because of the clout wielded by the 1st Air Commando Group, commanded by Col. Philip "Flip" Cochran. A special-operations unit in today's parlance, the commandos operated in India and Burma under an order from President Franklin D. Roosevelt that assured fulfillment of almost any request for equipment.

In 1944, arrangements were made to send four R-4Bs to Burma to assist in rescue efforts. The helicopters were to augment L-1 Vigilant and L-5 Sentinel light planes that frequently landed behind the lines to rescue troops separated from their units.

Former Staff Sgt. Jim Phelan was a member of the Bridgeport group and Harman's crew chief.

"We dismantled the R-4Bs and flew them halfway around the world as cargo in C-46 transports," Phelan said. "One helicopter was lost in an accident during the trip. Another crashed on its first flight in Lalaghat, India. By the time we became operational, we had just one R-4B left."

On April 21, 1944, an L-1 rescued three British soldiers behind Japanese lines but crashed, still behind the lines. Pilot Sgt. Ed Hladovec and the three soldiers sought cover in a rice paddy.

An L-5 found them but could not land in vegetated terrain crisscrossed by paddy fields and surrounded by slopes. The L-5 made a low-level pass and dropped a handwritten message to Hladovec: "Move up mountain. Japanese nearby."

Meanwhile, a radio call went out for Harman and his helicopter. The toughest part of the rescue for Harman was the 600-mile solo trip from Lalaghat to Aberdeen, a temporary airstrip in Burma deep inside Japanese territory. Part of the journey involved crossing over high mountain peaks, a challenge for the underpowered helicopter.

The YR-4B had a range of only about 150 miles, so Harman had to carry a supply of gas in jerry cans and stop several times to refuel. Once at Aberdeen, Harman was guided to Hladovec by an L-5.

On April 24, Harman reached the downed quar-

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Harman

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tet and began hauling the men to safety. Since the R-4B could carry only its pilot and one other person, it took Harman most of a day to haul the three Britons to safety.

"The final part of the rescue was aimed at Hladovcak," Harman said, "He was signaling, trying to tell me something. I didn't understand the signal, but learned later that he was shouting about Japanese troops bearing down on him. As I approached him, soldiers broke out of the tree line about 1,000 feet from him, some with their rifles held in the air."

Harman did not see the approaching troops. He landed, picked up Hladovcak and took off quickly.

Years later, Harman learned that the approaching troops were not Japanese but instead members of a British long-range raiding party known as Chindits. The Chindits subsequently engaged Japanese troops only a mile from the rescue site.

Harman left the military as a captain at war's end in September 1945. He pursued various postwar careers.

Harman is aware of the risk of being recognized as "first" at anything. "There's another helicopter rescue that sometimes is cited as the first," said Harman, referring to a Jan. 26, 1945, rescue in Burma.

On that date, Harman said, Capt. Frank Peterson and his copilot 1st Lt. Irvin Steiner rescued Pvt. Howard Ross from a 4,700-foot mountain ridge in an R-4.

That successful mission came eight months after Harman flew the first such mission. □

Robert F. Dorr, an Air Force veteran, lives in Oakton, Va. He is the author of numerous books on Air Force topics, including "Air Force One." His e-mail address is robertdorr@aol.com.



Later versions of the R-4 included the first rescue hoist system

