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Armed Forces: Operation Rescue

U.S. Air Force 1st Lieut. James A. Cullen of Winchester, Mass., could hardly have been in a tighter spot. Hit by Viet Minh gunners during a bombing run over Quangkhe during last week's raids, Cullen bailed out of his F-100 Super Sabre into the Gulf of Tonkin—and practically into the midst of a flotilla of armed Communist junks and torpedo boats. Muzzles flashing, the Red vessels sped toward Cullen as he desperately sought cover behind his life raft. Said he: "I thought I was finished."

He very well might have been, but seven U.S. Navy Skyraiders from a nearby Seventh Fleet carrier suddenly swooped in almost low enough to get their bellies wet, buzzed the Red vessels. Meanwhile, an amphibious Air Force HU-16 "Albatross" that had been circling off Quangkhe in case of just such an emergency, zeroed in on a radio homing beacon built into Cullen's life belt and sighted a brilliant orange marker dye that the downed pilot had released into the water. Defying 5-ft. waves, the Albatross set down without mishap in the choppy gulf, taxied up to Cullen, and was flying him back to South Viet Nam only 30 minutes after he hit the water.

"I Love You." Cullen's rescue was a dramatic but by no means unique example of a highly effective U.S. operation in Viet Nam. Since last October, when the Fifth Air Rescue Detachment was set up at South Viet Nam's Danang airbase with Albatrosses and H43-F "Huskie" helicopters, as many as 15 U.S. and South Vietnamese pilots have been plucked from Red-infested jungles in Viet Nam and Laos and from waters off the coast; the exact figure is classified. In the series of raids against North Viet Nam since last Feb. 7, the efficient rescuers have racked up an enviable batting average—out of ten pilots shot down, seven have been saved.

The operation calls for extraordinary precision and coordination, often involves Army and Air Force helicopters from as far off as Thailand, Air Force escorts from all over South Viet Nam, Navy fighters from carriers in the South China Sea.

In last week's renewed aerial action, a Huskie helicopter was whirring over the Gulf of Tonkin in search of Cullen when Vietnamese 1st Lieut. Nguyen Van Phu, who ditched his flaming Skyraider near the spot where the U.S. pilot went down, fired a smoke signal to attract its attention. The Huskie, flying out of Danang, dropped to within 3 ft. of the pitching wave crests, plucked the wounded pilot out of the water and started back toward South Viet Nam.

On the way, it joined another Huskie and an escort of American fighters that had picked up yet another urgent distress call—from a U.S. captain whose Thunderchief jet was shot down over the tangled jungle near Quangkhe. Sighting a signal fire that the captain had resourcefully lighted on the bank of a stream, one Huskie descended to 100 ft., hauled the captain into the chopper with a steel cable and winch. As he scrambled gratefully aboard, the rescued pilot cried to the crew, "I love you, I love you."

Good Haul. The other U.S. pilots were picked up in equally daring operations. An Air Force helicopter based at Nakhon Phanom in northeast Thailand zipped over to Tchepone, a Laotian town overrun by Pathet Lao and Viet Minh regulars, picked up the pilot of a downed U.S. Thunderchief from the jungle. In a night operation inside North Viet Nam, another hovering helicopter used electronic strobe lights and flares to find a U.S. pilot in the jungle and rescue him.

Of the six pilots downed during the week's raids, the only one still missing at week's end was 1st Lieut. Hayden J. Lockhart Jr., who was seen parachuting into the southwest corner of North Viet Nam after his Super Sabre was hit by ground fire. U.S. reconnaissance jets flew over the area daily, taking photographs and listening for radio signals, while rescue choppers made risky low-level runs. On several occasions, the choppers drew fire from Viet Minh patrols in the area—an indication that the Communists too might be looking for Lieut. Lockhart.