

snail-slow and therefore that much more susceptible as a target, and one gets an idea of what these men brave each time they go out.

Even in a service where courageous actions are often taken for granted, Master Sergeant Charles T. Walther is a man among men, a living example of everything pararescuemen try to live up to. This rock-hard native of Parkersburg, West Virginia, made not one but two miraculous saves in Southeast Asia. One involved the life of a Vietnamese pilot, and the other—an entire flight line of B-57 bombers.

It was near dark on the evening of May 4, 1965, at Bien Hoa Air Base when the crash phone rang.

"There's a fire on the flight line," an excited voice boomed. "All personnel evacuate the area immediately." On that line were a dozen B-57s, each with a full load of 750-pound bombs under their wings, ready for runs over North Vietnam.

In minutes Walther was airborne in an HH-43F Huskie piloted by Captain Ed Cook. As darkness settled, the fire was easy to spot. A parachute flare had ignited directly under one of the bombers. It was a magnesium fire and glowed a brilliant white that hurt the eyes to look directly into it. Cook circled the area slowly, and after surveying the scene, turned to Walther.

"I think we can put it out, Sergeant. Let's go down."

"Okay, Skip!"

Huskies come equipped with their own fire-fighting equipment. Intermeshing rotors provide a swirling downwash that beats back flames and opens a cool air path for the rescue team's entry. Foam from each helo's thousand-pound fire-suppression kit keeps the path open and prevents flashback flames.

The crew blanketed the fire with foam, but because of the magnesium and the force with which the foam came from the hoses, it didn't stick to the white-hot flare. A quick decision was made. Cook landed and Walther and Staff Sergeant Tom Hughes ran over to the B-57 and began scooping the foam onto the fire *with their hands!* It was the only way they could make it adhere and thus smother the blazing flare. It took great courage to do this, for if enough heat reached the big bombs on the plane's wings, the entire flight line would go up in a monumental blast. The two sergeants had to work fast, because Walther reached up to feel the bombs and they were already warm. Sweat dripped off both men, as much from nerve-wrangling fear as from the stifling heat.

"I was scared," Walther says, "as scared as I've ever been or ever want to be, but we knew we had to get that fire out and out quick. Hughes is a big boy, about 230 pounds, and usually slow and easygoing, but he moved faster than I'd ever seen him, and we were able to smother the flare."

It was a close call, though just how close no one

knew until a short time later. Meanwhile Walther's superiors put him in for one of the highest Air Force decorations, saying in their report of the incident that his action had saved the flight line. Higher up the chain of command someone downgraded this as assuming too much, and the sergeant eventually wound up with an Airman's Medal.

Sixteen days after the mission a similar fire broke out under a plane at Tan Son Nhut, and the entire flight line blew up in a prodigious explosion that sent flames and billowing clouds of black smoke soaring hundreds of feet in the air!

Six months later, at Bien Hoa, Walther was involved in another spectacular save. Taking off in a Skyraider for a strafing run across enemy lines, a Vietnamese pilot suddenly lost control of his aircraft.

"He's not going to make it," an airman screamed from the base control tower. At that instant the A-1E slammed back into the runway, skidded drunkenly for several hundred feet, then flipped over and came to a crunching halt upside down in a drainage ditch. High octane from its full tanks spewed all over and soaked the wrecked fuselage.

"No one could live through that," the airman exclaimed. Fire trucks nevertheless roared down the runway, their sirens wailing and lights flashing. But as they neared the crash they screeched to an abrupt halt, and asbestos-suited firemen looked hopelessly at the

smoking plane. They couldn't reach it. Separating them was a hundred yards of quicksand-like muck.

At the first sound of the alarm, Captain John Boyles and his crew took off. They were over the Skyraider in a minute, and Boyles made a snap decision: the only way they could help would be to hover just above the muck and drop the pararescuemen out. Without hesitation, Walther and Tech Sergeant Dominic Cousy jumped. They nearly disappeared from sight in the sludge, but managed to wade to the site. Walther's prime fear was that the plane might break into flames and explode at any instant, so he and Cousy blanketed the area with foam from their fire-suppression kits. Then Walther dug a tunnel through the thick muck and felt for the Vietnamese pilot's body. He grabbed a hand and squeezed. The hand squeezed back, startling Walther. The man was alive!

"Get a crash ax, Dominic," Walther barked. "We'll have to try and cut our way through the fuselage." But before Cousy returned, a more immediate problem developed. The Skyraider was sinking in the mire. The pilot was now in a very real danger of suffocating. So the sergeant began to dig—to keep a lifeline of air open. For a while it was like building a sand castle on the ocean's edge with the tide pounding in. The faster he dug, the quicker the muck caved in. But he was determined. A life was at stake. The sweat rolled off Walther's forehead and his arms throbbed with pain,

but there could be no letup, for the instant he quit, the muck filled in the opening.

A crane had been called to the scene when it was feared the plane might sink from sight. At last other men arrived and helped Walther dig until the crane hooked onto the Skyraider's upside-down landing gear and slowly lifted the plane up. When it had cleared the mire, Walther unsheathed his long-bladed steel knife, reached in through the cockpit canopy, and ripped off the pilot's safety harness. Two minutes later he had the victim freed, and eased him out of the aircraft. He didn't have a second to spare, for scarcely had he cleared the cockpit when the crane's cable snapped in midair and the Skyraider plummeted down with a resounding plop and sank beneath the surface.

It had been another close one. Give or take a minute or two and Walther could have been under that wing when the cable snapped. But he shrugged off his heroics later, saying, as all ARRS men do, that it was only part of his job. He got a second Airman's Medal for it despite his modesty.

Not all heroes are PJs, and not all award-winning rescues are made over Vietnam. Many, like that carried out by Captain Anthony A. Muehling, Jr., of Louisville, Kentucky, are accomplished over water, far from land.

On June 18, 1965, Captain Muehling was alerted of

the fiery midair collision of two huge B-52 jet bombers over the South China Sea. The powerful, long-range B-52s, many of which are based on Guam, fly daily into North Vietnam to pound enemy installations with hundreds of tons of bombs. Piloting an HU-16 Albatross, Captain Muehling flew to the scene and sighted one man lying motionless in a life raft.

The mission was complicated by a passing typhoon, which had kicked up extremely rough seas, but Muehling skillfully managed to set the versatile plane down near the raft. The man was already dead. Nearby, however, were two survivors, and he taxied over and picked them up. Later, another raft was spotted, but en route to it an enormous wave swamped the aircraft, setting off an electrical fire on the flight deck and knocking out the radio. With a rare dedication, Muehling was able to reach the victim, haul him aboard, and render first aid. When a fourth crash survivor was fished from the savage waters an hour later, Muehling turned his crippled plane toward home base. Repeatedly he attempted to take off, but an engine power loss, ever-mounting seas, and sustained heavy winds prevented lift-off.

Other planes, circling overhead, fixed the HU-16's position but could not land. Instead they radioed the closest ships for aid. After hours of being tossed about in mountainous swells, the crew and the four survivors all suffered from severe seasickness, dehydration, and