

IN THE FINEST TRADITION

by Capt. Gerry Hickman
USAF Combat News

In the finest tradition of suspense theater, a U.S. Air Force Rescue aircrew has snatched a downed U.S. Navy pilot from certain capture or death with only seconds to spare.

Flying 64 miles north of the de-militarized zone separating the Republic of Viet-Nam from its Communist neighbor, an Air Rescue HH-43-B Huskie helicopter crew saved Navy Lieutenant (junior grade) Grant R. Townsend of West Palm Beach, Fla.

Crackling flames and North Vietnamese were only moments away from the downed pilot when the rescue crew, commanded by U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. Walter F. Turk of Manhattan Beach, Calif., arrived.

Lieutenant (j.g.) Townsend had been flying an A-4 Douglas Skyhawk on a strike against North Vietnamese military targets. He was rolling in on a bombing run and had started to pull out when he felt an explosion. Flames engulfed his aircraft and he ejected.

The next thing the Navy pilot remembers is swinging from his parachute, close to the ground. Landing in an area of elephant grass about 14 feet high, he was able to move only with difficulty.

Abandoning his chute, he climbed some 50 yards up a hillside and could see he was in an inhabited area. He found a hiding place and contacted the other members of his Navy flight still circling overhead.

more

2--In the Finest Tradition (Rel. No. 509)

As stillness settled, Lieutenant (j.g.) Townsend could hear wind rustling through the grass.

Then he heard other sounds; people were moving through the tall growth in his direction. Speaking into his survival radio, he told the circling pilots: "I'd appreciate it if you could strafe the hillside down from my chute. There're people down there."

The Navy aviators rolled in and strafed the hillside. Townsend could hear sounds, then, of people running, but he kept hidden and didn't see them.

As things quieted down again, the downed pilot was told a rescue chopper would be on the scene within 30 minutes. It was then 1:45 p.m. and he had left his stricken plane at 1:07 p.m.

Before leaving his Skyhawk, Lieutenant (j.g.) Townsend had radioed for help and his call had been heard by Capt. Steven Stefanec of Phoenix, Ariz., a controller on duty at the U.S. Air Force Search and Rescue Center at Tan Son Nhut.

Immediately calling for rescue aircraft to proceed to the distress area, Captain Stefanec alerted Lieutenant Turk and his crew along with another helicopter flown by Capt. Thomas J. Curtis of Houston, Tex. Lieutenant Turk took off at 1:14 p.m.

As the helicopters beat their way toward the distress scene, North Vietnamese tried repeatedly to reach Lieutenant (j.g.) Townsend's hilltop position. Again and again he called his Navy buddies in for strafing runs to drive the Communists back. Finally, hearing voices of several people, the lieutenant called for an additional strike. This time the Navy pilots used rockets which caused the North Vietnamese to retreat but also set the elephant grass afire.

3--In the Finest Tradition (Rel. No. 509)

Crouched in his hiding place, Lieutenant (j.g.) Townsend suddenly heard the crackle of flames. At first, he thought a large number of Communists were approaching.

"I thought they're really coming this time," he recounted later.

Then, spotting smoke, he realized the grass was aflame. To his horror he saw the fire was crackling up the hillside toward him. Just as the flames reached his discarded parachute he heard what he described as "the wonderful whup-whup-whup of a helicopter."

Lieutenant Turk said he approached the area at an extremely high altitude for a helicopter homing in on signals from the aircraft protecting Townsend.

"We dropped down through a hole in the clouds and spotted the smoke of the fire which was threatening Grant," the rescue pilot recalls. "After spotting the smoke, our job was just a piece of cake," he added.

Talking to Lieutenant Turk via radio Lieutenant (j.g.) Townsend directed the rescue aircraft to his hiding place. As SSgt. Roberto Rodrigues of El Paso, Tex., and ALC Robert W. Evans of San Diego, Calif., helped the Navy flyer aboard, the flames engulfed his discarded chute.

Lieutenant Turk and his copilot, Capt. Joe E. Ballanger of Norton, Kan., said they did not see any North Vietnamese and attributed this to the Navy aircraft circling overhead.

"When you start throwing 20mm cannon fire around, everybody ducks," Lieutenant Turk explained.

more

4--In the Finest Tradition (Rel. No. 509)

Following the dramatic rescue, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Viet-Nam, received both men and they appeared before a Saigon press conference covering the fighting here.

Members of the second rescue helicopter which flew to the area include: Captain Curtis, pilot; 1st Lt. Duane W. Martin, Denver, Colo., copilot; A1C William A. Robinson, Robersonville, N.C., helicopter mechanic; and A2C Richard A. Wallace, Huntington Beach, Calif., a paramedic.

The rescue marks the sixth such rescue mission over North Viet-Nam flown by Lieutenant Turks and his fellow crewmen who are serving in Southeast Asia on temporary duty from Det. 3, Western Air Rescue Center, Kirtland, N.M. (PACAF NS)