

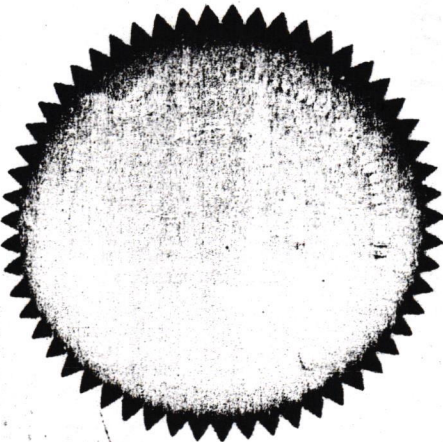
CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF

THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

TO

HARRY W. BIRTEL

Airman First Class Harry W. Birtel distinguished himself by heroism while participating in aerial flight as a Rescue Helicopter Pararescueman over North Vietnam on 18 November 1965. On that date, Airman Birtel's outstanding professional abilities and devotion to duty were the instrumental factors in the successful accomplishment of the rescue of a downed F-105 pilot, within hostile territory and under the constant threat of hostile ground fire. The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Airman Birtel reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.



NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION:

Captain John B. Riederich and crew distinguished themselves heroically in North Vietnam retrieving a downed pilot in enemy held territory and returning him to safety.

On 18 November 1965 at approximately 1440 local time while Captain Riederich and his crew were standing alert at Nakhon Phanom Air Base in Thailand, they were notified by Tactical Aircraft Control Center at Udorn that an F-105 Thunderchief had been shot down approximately fifteen miles South, Southwest of the city of Vinh in North Vietnam. A quick glance at a map revealed that the approximate position was very close to the area where another helicopter and crew had been lost to heavy ground fire. Captain Riederich immediately plotted a zigzag course which would afford the best route through the numerous concentrations of antiaircraft guns and fire control radar positions. Computations revealed that additional fuel would be required, if a prolonged search was involved. The required fuel was pumped into the auxiliary tanks of the alert helicopters. Eight minutes after initial notification of the downed F-105 pilot, the following Air Rescue Crews were airborne: Low Bird HH-43F - Rescue Crew Commander: Captain John B. Riederich, Co-Pilot: First Lieutenant Charles R. Sweet. Crewchief: Airman Second Class Charles E. Veasy, Pararescueman: Airman First Class Harry W. Birtel. High Bird HH-43F - Pilot: First Lieutenant Frederick T. Dykes, Co-Pilot: First Lieutenant Kenneth G. Griffis, Crewchief: Airman Second Class Phillip D. Carlson. Captain Riederich led the flight of two helicopters over mountainous Laos into North Vietnam. During climb our radar contact was established with GCI and the Rescuemaster C-54. Heavy cloud cover and rain showers plagued the flight through Laos. Both helicopters were flown IFR for quite lengthy periods. Captain Riederich and his wingman Lieutenant Dykes arrived in the area of the downed pilot approximately one hour after take-off. The fighter escort A-1H aircraft which had been scrambled from Udorn had not arrived in the area. Captain Riederich decided to orbit west of the downed pilot area to divert attention from the area. Captain Riederich established contact with the fighters and led them into the general area where the pilot had bailed out. The downed pilot was using his URT-21 beacon and his emergency URG-11 voice radio, however, none of the fighter aircraft could locate the pilot. Most of his voice transmissions were garbled. Captain Riederich had been orbiting at eight thousand feet to remain well clear of the definite ground fire. Due to the impending darkness in a few hours and fuel limitations, Captain Riederich decided that it was necessary to descend and search the area at approximately five hundred feet if the pilot were to be found and recovered. Captain Riederich instructed Lieutenant Dykes to descend no lower than four thousand above ground level and to keep a constant watch on Captain Riederich's aircraft while he searched the area low level. Captain Riederich immediately initiated a rapid rate spiral descent to provide an elusive target to enemy gunners. The area consisted of dense rain forest growing up the sides of mountains which met in a valley where antiaircraft positions could be seen.

and low enough so that enemy gunners could not silhouette his aircraft. After fifteen minutes of low level searching, smoke from a flare was spotted by Captain Riederich, this led him to the general area of the downed pilot. A second flare put him over the pilot and while in a right bank the pilot fired a third flare. The pilot was located in heavy trees about thirty feet below the tops and about fifty feet above the ground. Captain Riederich circled to a downwind while Airman Veasy prepared the hoist for the pick-up. The approach route had to be flown in close proximity to an antiaircraft battery position in the valley below. Captain Riederich brought his aircraft to a hover over the tops of the trees in which the downed pilot was embedded. The right rotor blade was narrowly missing a large tree. Airman Veasy lowered the hoist, with the tree penetrator attached, to the pilot who secured himself to the seat. Airman Veasy then ran the hoist up. It took well over five minutes of struggling with the hoist motor to get the pilot up to the cabin door. The pilot would become tangled in the heavy foilage every few feet. Airman Veasy skillfully maneuvered the hoist while continually giving maneuvering instructions to Captain Riederich. After the pilot was raised to the cabin door and was being brought inside by Airman Veasy, Airman Birtel spotted enemy troops crawling through the forest below. Airman Birtel immediately discharged his M-16 at the enemy and continued to fire while Captain Riederich dove the helicopter over the side of an adjoining ridge and sped down a valley to get away from the enemy. Captain Riederich climbed at maximum power and rejoined with his wingman for the return flight to Nakhon Phanom Air Base. The rescued pilot Captain Larry Mahaffey, whose life had been saved, was returned to his squadron in excellent condition and fine spirit.
