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"THE TORTOISE AND THE HARE, VIETNAM STYLE"

By Bob Ruhl

MEDIA FEATURE SERVICE, HQ MAC, SCOTT AFB, ILL. -- The hare had a long lead on the tortoise when the two Air Force rescue helicopters churned out of the dust at Da Nang Air Base, South Vietnam, and headed west.

"Don't kid yourself," said Capt. John B. Kneen, a Rescue pilot. "When we get a call for help, it's a race to see if we can pick up survivors at a crash site before the Viet Cong gets to them. They usually have a head start, but we win most of the races."

Winning life or death races is the job of the 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron in Vietnam. Since December 1964, rescue crews have grabbed 450 survivors -- one of the most impressive achievements of the war -- from actual combat zones, including 114 downed pilots.

Flying in squatty, four-man HH-43 "Huskie" helicopters, Kneen was aboard the secondary aircraft while a close friend, Capt. Harold A. (Andy) Solberg, piloted the primary.

"We were in the air just 10 minutes after we got a call that an AC-47 attack aircraft was down about two miles from Ashau Camp," Kneen said. "The

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plane had gone down in a narrow valley that was barely wide enough for jet fighters to maneuver through and give us any support. We knew we were on our own for the most part."

The Huskies whirled away down the valley at 109 m. p. h., flying directly over Viet Cong positions and skirting between 100-foot-tall trees to reach the crash site. "We were warned that the downed crew was under intense fire at close range," Kneen said, "and rescue attempts would be dangerous, if not impossible."

The crews of the unarmed helicopters decided to make a rescue attempt after an A-1 fighter made a low-level straffing run to keep the VC from over-running the survivors.

Low altitude, speed, surprise and tree cover kept the helicopters from being hit, Kneen noted, "but we found out that the Viet Cong were just 35 to 45 yards from the crash and moving in quickly."

Flying directly over the AC-47, the helicopters quick-stopped on a hill 75 feet from the downed aircraft. Seeing no survivors, the pilots moved the Huskies closer and hovered against the side of a hill.

"Suddenly three men ran from the plane and piled into Andy's helicopter," Kneen said. "The crew had to fire away at the VC while trying to pull men into the rear of the helicopter." The original plan was to take four survivors

in the first helicopter and three in the second, which would maneuver into position after the first departed.

"Andy's Huskie left and we moved in," Kneen continued. "When the remaining survivors didn't show, our mechanic and pararescue specialist went out looking for them. They found two dead crewmen, and Andy learned from the survivors aboard his aircraft that the remaining crewmen were all dead."

Kneen took his helicopter up and hovered high, trying to alert his men on the ground. "When we went in to pick them up, we saw that they were pinned down by enemy fire less than 11 yards from our aircraft," Kneen said.

A fighter made another pass at the VC, and in the confusion the rescue crewmen raced to reach the helicopter. A machine gun tore up the ground around them, but they scrambled aboard and Kneen took off.

For their actions the crews were nominated for the Air Force Cross and Silver Star. Although both regard the Ashau Camp rescue as an exceptionally exciting day's work, they feel a mission last December during Operation Harvest Moon was especially hazardous.

"We landed at night in a rice paddy looking for a crew and passengers of a Marine helicopter that went down 30 miles south of Da Nang," Kneen said. "We had to make a blackout landing. The survivors turned on flashlights for a second, then turned them off.

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"There were four Marines and one crew member on the ground. Tracers were flying all over the place as we made our final approach. Six mortar rounds went off about 1,500 feet behind us, and the Huskie really shook. We got more tracers as we took off and some 50 mm machine gun fire. I think we must have gotten 2,000 rounds fired at us but we didn't get a scratch on the aircraft.

"One helicopter that went in before us got shot down, and one got hit after us. But we managed to pick up three of the Marines."

Four or five people can be picked up at one time by a Huskie. "It's not a very big aircraft," Kneen said, "and the people are crowded. But they are usually in such a hurry to leave that they don't mind the close quarters."

All isn't gunfire and gallantry for the rescue crews of the 38th, a unit of the Military Airlift Command (MAC), with headquarters at Scott AFB, Ill. There's some in-between "shaking" time involved, too.

"Thinking about the missions before and after kind of gets you," said Solberg, a handsome 33-year-old father of two girls. "But during an actual rescue I thoroughly enjoy it. While you're on alert, you have the feeling of peace and security for some reason and you hope everything will be okay. On the other hand, you hope the action will pick up."

Action is a way of life for Solberg, from Tacoma, Wash., and Kneen, a 31-year-old father of five who hails from Belvidere, Vt.

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In their first six months at the blistering hot air base, 380 miles north of Saigon, each flew 176 hours, of which about 160 was combat time. Each has flown more than 200 combat sorties, counting local base rescue missions when they were called out to aid pilots landing with in-flight emergencies.

The ability to pass time constructively at the base, hemmed in by water, mountains and Marines, is an important skill. Kneen has completed three correspondence courses in higher mathematics and physics and is teaching himself French and to play the guitar. Solberg zipped through 35 books in four months and is also teaching himself to play the guitar.

Bird-watching is another of Solberg's avocations. "Just part of my background in wildlife management," he laughed. "You know, I've even tried birdwatching from a helicopter but it's just too tough."

But it's not nearly as hazardous as searching for downed pilots, crewmen or wounded allied soldiers and Marines at tree-top level--especially when you're the tortoise trying to outrace the hare.