

For Extraordinary Heroism

by SMSgt. JAMES A. GEORGE

The Airman Staff

Enemy guns had blasted his aircraft out of the water. Now the shells and armed sampans were closing in. Alone, he was the

LAST MAN INTO THE SLING

BURNED, bleeding and alone, Air Force navigator Capt. Donald S. Price suddenly discovered that his one-man raft was drifting toward shore and the enemy guns. He jumped into the choppy waters of the Gulf of Tonkin and began swimming seaward, pulling his raft behind him.

In two months he would be 27, but he was beginning to have serious doubts that he would be around to blow out the candles on his birthday cake. The day was March 14, 1966, and the HU-16 *Albatross* navigator knew that if he lived through it, he would never be able to forget the things that were happening to him.

The day had started routinely enough. Captain Price and his fellow HU-16 crew members were on temporary duty from their Okinawa-based Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service unit. They were flying rescue missions with the 37th ARRS at Da Nang AB, along the northern coast of South Vietnam. Most of the missions were long and routine, requiring the HU-16 crewmen to fly a series of standby patterns over the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. They were there—just in case they were needed.

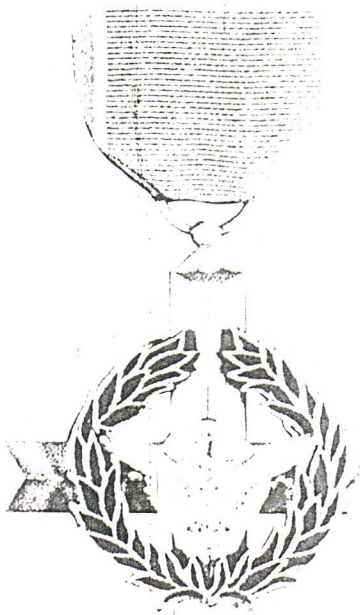
They were. That same day an Air Force F-4C *Phantom* pilot and his pilot-systems operator also took off from Da Nang on a strike mission against an enemy bridge in North Vietnam. As they raced through flak bursts in a dive on their target they took a hit from antiaircraft batteries below. Maj. James M. Peerson, the F-4C pilot, kept boring in on the bridge, however. He and systems operator Capt. Lynwood C. Bryant put their bombs right on the target before they climbed out to head for the eastern coast and the Gulf.

Major Peerson radioed the other F-4C pilots in his flight that his aircraft was badly damaged. Then he concentrated on keeping his crippled jet airborne until he and Bryant could "punch out" over water. They knew help would be nearby if they could make it to the Gulf of Tonkin.

The two *Phantom* pilots finally reached the coast, where they ejected from their F-4C. When he hit the water, Major Peerson climbed into his small raft and established radio contact with the F-4C pilots who had accompanied their fellow fliers over enemy terrain to the Gulf.

Meanwhile, alerted to the planned bailout by the F-4 pilots, Price's pilot, Capt. David Westenbarger banked his HU-16 northward toward the area of the Gulf where he and his rescue crew hoped to make the pickup. On the way, the *Albatross* crewman radioed one of the Search and Rescue (SAR) destroyers in the Gulf and requested two Navy helicopters also be sent to the area. It turned out to be a wise suggestion, as Captains Price and Westenbarger and other crew members of both aircraft would later acknowledge.

Major Peerson and Captain Bryant had splashed down about two miles from shore. Their *Phantom* escorts stayed in the area until the ARRS *Albatross* arrived, accompanied by an A-1E *Skyraider* flight. Enemy action was increasing around the shoreline. Fishing boats that had been at sea when the two fighter pilots ejected had raced for shore. They knew that North Vietnamese shore bat-



teries would begin taking pot shots at the ocean-going fliers, and were apparently eager to get out of range. But as the rescue aircraft arrived over the scene, some of the boats started a return to the offshore area. And they were loaded with weapons!

In the HU-16 Captain Westenbarger's crew got ready for an open-sea landing. The pilot jettisoned his external fuel tanks and full-stalled his aircraft into the water near the F-4 pilot who was closest to shore. As the *Sky-raid*ers circled overhead, watching and waiting, the seaplane taxied carefully over to pick up Major Pearson. But as soon as the pararescueman on the *Albatross* jumped out of the hatch to help get Major Pearson aboard, all hell broke loose.

"The pararescueman was towing me to the plane," Major Pearson said later. "I thought the ordeal was almost over . . . but our problems were just starting." From the enemy boats, and from the shore positions, every available gun started firing at the floating rescue aircraft. The sea churned and erupted with shrapnel. Captain Price ran from his navigator position to the rear of the HU-16. He yelled to the radio operator to help the flight mechanic pull the two pilots and the rescueman out of the water. Then he grabbed an M-16 and returned the enemy fire coming from one of the boats now approaching the aircraft.

Before anyone could pull Major Pearson aboard, however, the enemy shore batteries opened up again. A howitzer round scored a direct hit on the Air Rescue aircraft, turning it into a blazing inferno. Captain Price was knocked violently against the aft bulkhead. He was stunned for a few moments—he doesn't know how long. When he looked up again he saw the radio operator

near the rear hatch. He was dead. The flight mechanic was gone, too, apparently blown out the door.

Major Pearson and the pararescueman had been flung back into the sea. The PJ was dead. As the remaining airmen started abandoning their blazing seaplane, Major Pearson discovered that he had an injured back and couldn't move his legs. And he had just shucked his life vest a few moments before.

About that time, Captain Price was pulling himself up from the deck of the plane. As he got to his feet he was hit by a searing flash of fire from the igniting fuel tanks. Hair and face seared black, he scrambled out the doorway and into the Gulf, where he found the injured Pearson. Although dazed, Price decided to tow the F-4C pilot away from the burning aircraft.

To the injured navigator the whole episode was a horrible nightmare in slow motion. He thought suddenly of his wife Maureen, and their two children, and prayed silently that none of them would ever have to go through a similar hell. Then his thoughts jerked back to the perilous situation facing him and the wounded major.

"I told Pearson to hold on to my back and we'd get as far away from the plane as possible. I thought for sure it would blow up. Fuel was burning on the water all around us and we had to push it aside and half swim under the flames. Jackson (SSgt. Clyde W. III, the flight mechanic) was close by. So was Hall (Lt. Walter E., the HU-16's copilot). He yelled that he could see a helicopter coming for us."

Navigator Price stopped towing the injured fighter pilot when they reached what both thought was a safe distance from the burning HU-16. Neither was in any kind of condition for a long swim, Price realized as he

Capt. Donald S. Price, now a C-141 navigator, was awarded the Air Force Cross for heroism.



Maj. James M. Pearson (with foot on table) briefs other F-4C aircrew members on strike mission against a bridge 32 miles south of Than Hoa in North Vietnam. Hours later he was rescued.



took stock of the situation. His back was bleeding from shrapnel wounds.

Lieutenant Hall swam over to Sergeant Jackson, who also needed help. Suddenly a Navy SH-3A helicopter was hovering over Price and Pearson. The exhausted navigator helped the wounded F-4C pilot into the sling and watched him leave the sea as the cable was reeled in. When Price looked around he was alone in the Gulf with Sergeant Jackson. A second SH-3A had somehow pulled Lieutenant Hall aboard before he could get the sling to the flight mechanic. But within minutes it moved back into position and picked up the NCO.

Meanwhile, a Navy A-1E *Skyraider* was busy making passes at the shoreline batteries in an attempt to draw enemy fire away from the rescue scene. But when the Navy chopper that picked up Sergeant Jackson went after Captain Price, two large shells exploded about 10 yards in front and 30 yards to the right of the wounded navigator. Exploding shrapnel cut into the fuel lines of the helicopter. Its pilot was forced to pull out quickly and return to his ship.

So far, both Major Pearson and Captain Bryant—the F-4C pilots—had been picked up. So had Captain Westenbarger, Lieutenant Hall and Sergeant Jackson, all from the ravaged HU-16. The *Albatross'* radio operator and pararescueman didn't make it.

That left Captain Price alone in the choppy sea. Slowly, in pain, he swam for the empty one-man raft floating nearby. It seemed to take all his remaining strength to haul himself aboard, but he made it. Almost immediately, however, he discovered that the raft was drifting toward shore. He flopped back into the water. Calling upon some remaining inner strength, he began swimming seaward—towing the raft behind him.

He was feeling faint. Several times he felt himself on the edge of unconsciousness, but he fought it back. Though painful and exhausting, the effort of swimming and towing helped him remain conscious. Then he began experiencing difficulty in moving his legs, and his body began shaking in the cold water. He climbed back into the raft and opened his survival radio with trembling hands.

Captain Price listened as the radio echoed the *Skyraider* pilot's request for more air strikes against the shore batteries and enemy junks that were still heading for his small raft.

"Two F-4Cs came over in a hurry. They did something like a split 'S' maneuver then dove straight down on the beach. There was one tremendous explosion, and a lot of rumbling noise. Then an A-1 passed right over me, about 200 feet off the water, and the pilot let go with all his rockets—about four pods of them. They were like one big, black wave, heading toward the beach. And all of a sudden the sampans and junks were airborne. Pieces of wood were flying all over the area. Boy, was I glad to see those F-4s and the A-1."

With the pressure of the oncoming sampans temporarily removed, Captain Price felt tremendously relieved.

He started thinking again in terms of his rescue instead of worrying about survival. Calmer now, he listened to his radio, used his beeper signal, waited, then signalled again. When he didn't get a response he began worrying. "There was a helicopter in the area," he said, "but it seemed to be staying out to sea."

The uncontrollable shaking started again. He would shake violently for 20 or 30 seconds at a time. "I called the Rescap, but got no answer. Then I called for anyone who could read me. Still no answer. Then I spotted the helicopter, coming in low from the northeast." The F-4Cs and *Skyriders* had returned, meanwhile, and were strafing the beach and few remaining boats still intent on getting to the lone airman.

"There was one sampan fairly close by. As the helicopter came in for me the tail gunner sawed it in half with .50-caliber slugs. All I could see were the two ends of the boat flying into the air."

As the Navy UH-2B hovered over his raft, the crewmen lifted Captain Price out of the Gulf. Inside, he stretched out on his stomach. A crewman ripped his soaked flight suit down the back and started applying compresses to the navigator's bleeding wounds. Price still shook violently, uncontrollably, so the Navy airmen covered him with their own flight suits in an attempt to make him warm.

Within a few minutes he was aboard the utility ship *USS England*, where he received first aid treatment. Next morning, he was transferred to the aircraft carrier *USS Yorktown*, where complete medical facilities were available. On the carrier, Navy doctors worked on him for three hours. They removed many pieces of shrapnel—all they could get—and stitched his wounds. They couldn't remove all the bits and pieces of steel, however, and today Captain Price occasionally predicts the weather quite accurately.

Within two weeks he was back on duty with his unit at Naha, Okinawa. Five months later, he received the Air Force Cross for extraordinary heroism. Major Pearson later said, "I would surely have drowned if it hadn't been for Captain Price." In addition to the Air Force Cross, Captain Price wears the Distinguished Flying Cross with oak leaf cluster, six Air Medals, and the Purple Heart.

The Air Force navigator now flies C-141 missions out of McGuire AFB, N.J. Many of his crew's missions are to Vietnam.

Memories of that nightmarish March 14, 1966, are gradually dimming. Sometimes Captain Price goes whole days without remembering what happened out there in the Gulf of Tonkin. Then suddenly, for no apparent reason, the incident comes back into sharp focus. And he finds himself sitting in a raft shaking, radioing, hoping—the last man into the sling.

(Editor's Note: Sergeant George's story is based on 1966 and 1967 news releases prepared by Capt. Ron Marlar and Sgt. Joseph J. Kaweck. THE AIRMAN gratefully acknowledges their assistance in re-creating Captain Price's story.)