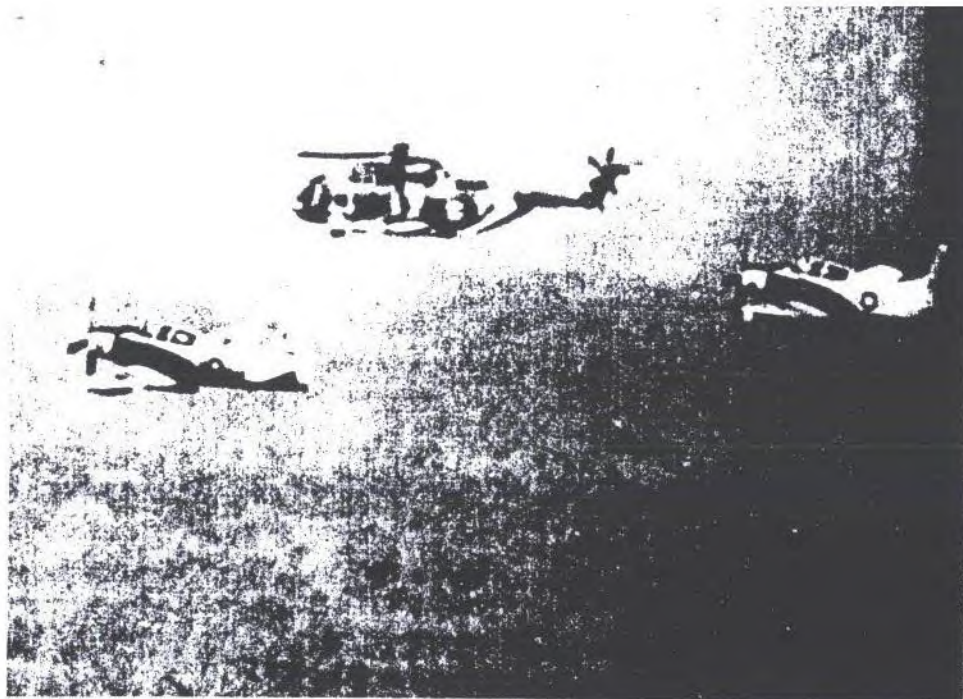




Escorted by two A-1E Skyraiders, an HH-3C helicopter ferries two jet pilots to safety over Vietnam jungles. Whenever possible, protective escort planes accompany rescue craft on missions behind enemy lines. (*Sikorsky Aircraft*)

exhaustion. Weak and nauseous, Muehling still fought desperately to maintain directional control with the one remaining engine to keep from capsizing.

Fourteen hours from the time the captain had set his aircraft down, a U.S. Navy vessel arrived, and an effort was made to hoist the Albatross aboard, following evacuation of the crash victims. Muehling stayed on the plane while his crewmen transferred to a life

raft. Then a giant swell lifted the amphibian and suddenly dropped it, snapping the hoisting cables. Seeing the falling plane was going to crush his crew members, Muehling physically yanked the raft clear at the last instant.

A citation accompanying the Aviators' Valor Award for 1965, which Muehling won, read:

... the Captain's extraordinary individual acts of heroism, humanitarian regard for his fellow man and disregard for his own personal safety, coupled with his sheer determination, made possible the saving of four lives, the recovery of a deceased pilot, and insured the safety of his own crew.

They call it "Thomas Mountain" in Vietnam now. And, for twenty-five hair-raising hours in late March 1965, First Lieutenant Kenneth D. Thomas, Jr., of Fairfield, Illinois, thought the 6,000-foot mountain he landed on after his F-105 Thunderchief had been hit by antiaircraft fire would be not only a jumping-off point, but his last resting place as well.

Thirty minutes after he ejected from his flaming jet and landed five hundred feet below the top of the steep mountain, an ARRS Jolly Green Giant lumbered into view. The jungle was so dense no visual sightings could be made, but the crew contacted Thomas by radio. When darkness came, helo pilot Captain William E. Cowell of Oahu, Hawaii, told the downed man

he would have to stick it out through the night; the crew would have to leave, but they'd be back.

At first light the next day, sure enough, there was the helicopter. Battling high winds, Cowell made several attempts to reach Thomas but failed. After three frustrating hours, he told the lieutenant to go farther down the mountainside until he reached a better area for a pickup.

Using a 200-foot nylon rope—part of his survival kit—Thomas descended three cliffs on his perilous journey and had to hack through tangled vines and heavy undergrowth with a knife. He walked and crawled for fifteen miles down the tortuous terrain and wore out the seat of his flying suit sliding down hills and over rocks.

He wound up in the bottom of a narrow canyon with steep cliffs on three sides, and despite his long, death-defying hike, was in no better position for recovery. Again, swirling winds and a strong downdraft kept Cowell from hovering over him. Each time he tried to get low enough for a pickup, gusty winds threatened to drag the helicopter into the side of the canyon.

With his strength waning, Thomas attempted to climb a sharp incline to reach a more accessible position, but he made it only to a narrow ledge. Six times Cowell tried, in vain, to reach him, and then he ran low of fuel. By now curious Viet Cong began scamper-

ing down the mountainside, so Cowell had the helo's hoist lowered to fake a pickup, just before returning to base that evening—again empty-handed.

For the second night in a row Thomas shivered and wondered if he were doomed to stay on his ledge forever. But the persistent Cowell was back once more at the crack of dawn, and while the lieutenant climbed to the top of a pile of rocks, Cowell hovered and the hoist was lowered its full 240 feet. Thomas stretched as far as he could and just barely reached it. He was whisked swiftly up and into the welcome chopper before the bewildered eyes of a VC patrol.

Asked later how worried he was, Thomas smiled and said, "I was beginning to have my doubts, but I never lost hope, because I knew our rescue people would do everything possible to get me out."

Occasionally, there is some ironic humor involved in a pickup. Such was the case when a U.S. jet jockey went down five miles from his home base at Bien Hoa one night. Apparently he didn't know how close he was to safety, and when some friendly South Vietnamese, wearing their traditional black pajamas, came running up to his battered plane, he mistook them for Viet Cong terrorists.

He leaped out of the cockpit and went tearing off into the woods, with the perplexed villagers in close pursuit. Rescue helicopters circled overhead, trying to follow him, and they finally caught him, but not before

MARCH 24

1819 FLEW PASSED THE MEKONG
RIVER TO ESCORT SANDY (A/E) BACK
FROM SITE OF 105 PILOT DOWNED
YESTERDAY. PICKED PILOT UP
19 THIS AFTERNOON (KELLERMAN ON
PICK-UP. LT THOMAS WAS THE
LT'S NAME

19

MARCH 25

DUTY

19

19

19