



A scramble alert in Vietnam today brings rescue crews on the run. Time is an all-important factor in attempting to save the lives of downed pilots or wounded men in Southeast Asia (*U.S. Air Force*)

1 □ "ALERT! ALERT!"

VIETNAM—3 P.M. April 11, 1966.

The scramble call blared over the loudspeakers at Bien Hoa Air Base, fifteen miles northeast of Saigon.

"Alert! Alert! Rescue helicopters needed immediately," the voice boomed. "Wounded soldiers in the jungle must be evacuated. Enemy closing in."

Before the terse announcement could be repeated, two crews of the Air Force's 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Detachment 6, were racing through screen doors leading to the airstrip.

Within minutes the men were inside dragonfly-shaped "Huskies," and the pilots, Captain Harold D. Salem and Captain Ronald L. Bachman, were revving

up the choppers' rotor blades for immediate takeoff.

Aboard the first craft, Salem turned around and counted noses: Major Maurice G. Kessler, co-pilot; Airman First Class Gerald C. Hammon, crew chief; and AFC William H. Pitsenbarger, pararescue specialist.

"What the devil are you doing here, Pits?" Salem shouted. "You're off duty today!"

"Never mind that now, Skipper," the trim youngster yelled back. "Let's go!"

Salem waved his hand; you couldn't beat a team like that. As far as his men were concerned, the Viet Cong weren't taking any days off. You don't fight a war on schedules.

Pitsenbarger was a rare breed of fighting man. Despite his youth—he was twenty-one—Pits had become one of the most highly respected pararescuemen in Vietnam. He had flown more than 350 combat missions. Once he had been lowered into the middle of a live minefield to pick up an injured man. He had courageously dropped to the ground without hesitation and made the rescue, even though he knew the helicopter's rotor wash and vibrations might detonate the deadly mines at any instant.

With a sudden thundering cry of power the two Huskies lifted from the dusty earth. The huge blades churned a storm of sand and dirt. The men aboard the choppers hung onto webbing straps and supports as

the pilots lowered the Huskies' noses, rushing away in a surging climb to the right.

Every takeoff was "combat critical." There might be Viet Cong in the nearby jungles. You didn't dare waste a moment on takeoff; the pilots went to full power and the engines screamed as they grabbed for sky. Every man wore his steel helmet and heavy flak vest that could stop all but a direct hit of enemy bullets. And no one relaxed.

Over the blatting roar and vibration of the chopper piloted by Salem the men shouted to one another. Then in the cockpit Salem depressed his intercom switch and spoke into the mike. His voice carried into the headsets worn by each crewman. This was to be his briefing—the men's first real information on where they were going.

"We've got a real fire to put out," he announced. "We're heading for a zone about seventy-five miles east of Bien Hoa. Some Army troops over there fighting in Operation Abilene have been hit pretty hard and have suffered heavy casualties. We've been asked to pick up the wounded from Damage Charlie Five Company out of the Big Red One's second brigade. They're pinned down in some thick jungle surrounded by the Viet Cong. The area's too tight for the big Army choppers to get into, so it's up to us. We should be there in a few minutes. Keep your eyes open for ground fire."

The whirlybirds roared on. Pits stared through the window at the blur of treetops rushing past him several hundred feet below.

A lean six-footer, Pits in civilian clothes would easily pass for a college student. That was, in fact, what he intended to be as soon as his year's tour of duty in Vietnam was up. He had a month to go. Then he would be off to Arizona State University to study medicine.

But the war had temporarily set him apart from other men his age. Following months of arduous training, he had become one of the most skilled, toughest physical specimens in the U.S. Armed Forces—a para-rescueman: precision parachutist, qualified SCUBA diver, medical technician, and expert on survival—all encompassed in one. He had become a lean, rock-hard airman dedicated to the goal of his chosen military profession: to help his fellow man in trouble.

"We're approaching the pickup zone," Salem blared into the intercom. "It's just up ahead there." They were about seventy-five miles east of Bien Hoa, and as Pits squinted off in the distance, he could make out a narrow opening in the forest. The Huskie's powerful engine strained as Salem took a wide arcing swing around the area and then headed back for the hole.

The crews of both helicopters kept their fingers on the triggers of machine guns and automatic rifles, ready

to blast at the enemy. Everyone looked for telltale flashes of bright light in the thick jungles below—the sign of death on its way. The Viet Cong didn't use tracers, so you couldn't follow the path of the bullets through the air.

Salem jockeyed the bird down past treetop level and hovered just above the dense underbrush. It was 3:30 P.M. A door in the side of the Kaman HH-43F helicopter opened and Pits hopped on a steel hoist cable, which was carefully lowered to the ground. The cable, a 200-foot-long umbilical lifeline, enables crews to get into even the most inaccessible areas, be they swamps, forests, or narrow canyon ledges.

"Over here," a voice sang out as Pits hit the earth. He used a machete to hack his way through the choking foliage, and as sweat soaked through his uniform fatigues, he came into a small clearing at the base of some tall trees. There he saw about two dozen GIs scattered in the area. Some were dead, others severely wounded.

"They got us bad," Sergeant Fred C. Navarro told Pits. "They hit us with artillery, and snipers have been picking away at us all afternoon. We can't move. The Viet Cong are everywhere."

Rifle shots crackled through the air—enemy shots. It was occasionally returned by a burst of automatic fire from one of the wounded soldiers, shooting blindly into the thicket. The VC snipers were firing from well-



A rescue helicopter hovers over a survivor in a dinghy on a lake. Rescues in Huskie helicopters are made like this all over the world, including Vietnam. A hoist is dropped to the survivor and he is hauled upward and into the craft. (*U.S. Air Force*)

camouflaged perches high in the treetops, and their weapons made terrifying sounds that kept the GIs pinned under logs, behind stumps, or any other cover available. First there would be the ominous crack of

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the rifle, then the sharp whine of a bullet en route to its target.

"Take it easy, old man," Pits said to Navarro reassuringly. "We'll get you out of this. Where're you from, Sarge?"

"Hutchinson, Kansas," Navarro replied, amazed at the calmness of the young airman.

"Heck," Pits returned. "They can't finish off a tough Jayhawker like you." As he talked he went swiftly from one soldier to another, surveying, seeing who was dead and who could be saved. Then he began working over one man, closing his wounds and strapping him into a Stokes' litter basket—a sort of wire mesh ambulance bed—that had been lowered by the hoist. After the man had been secured, he was lifted in the basket into the hovering Huskie, which then disappeared beyond the tree line, sending down a welcome breeze from its rotor wash. Pits hadn't had time to think of the steaming jungle heat until now, but rivulets of sweat were pouring from him.

"Hang on, you guys," Pits shouted to the other men, trying to be heard above the roar of the helicopter's engine. "They'll be right back. They're going to drop that fellow off at a medical station and then return. There's another chopper up there waiting to come down. We'll have you all out before dark."

While Salem flew to a field aid station near the tiny village of Binh Ba, seven miles away, and landed to

offload the wounded soldier, Captain Bachman hovered the second Huskie over the clearing. Staff Sergeant David Milsten and Pits hurriedly readied another man for evacuation. They were fighting time. The Viet Cong were tightening their circle with a human noose of soldiers to strangle the surrounded Americans. The two rescue crews, working in shifts, flew back and forth between the jungle and Binh Ba, and by 5 P.M. nine wounded soldiers had been airlifted to safety.

On his third flight into the area, Salem again steadied his craft and lowered the litter basket via the hoist for another pickup. On the previous runs there had been only sporadic ground fire at the armor-plated HH-43F, which, while hovering, was a sitting-duck target. But now, just as Pits was reaching for the hoist, the Viet Cong opened up with everything they had.

Staccato bursts of bullets filled the air with ear-splitting racket, and a heavy volley of fire from a .30 caliber machine gun ripped into the great metallic bird. As the chopper lurched under the impact, Salem was nearly bucked out of the cockpit. Power and rpm indicators went screaming over the red lines of safety.

"Pits!" Salem hollered, shouting through a bullhorn to make himself heard above the whine of the rotor blades and blasts of gunfire. "Pits, we've been hit. We've got to take her out of here now or we're going down. Hop on the hoist. We'll reel you in."

Suddenly the young airman was faced with the most

important decision of his life. Looking straight overhead, he could see the chopper had been hit badly and couldn't dally another minute without danger of exploding in flames on the spot. He knew a massive force of heavily armed VC had the clearing completely surrounded and were closing in fast. There would be little, if any, chance for survival on the ground. Yet he knew the soldiers, wounded and scared, were virtually helpless. It took him only a split second to make up his mind.

He waved Salem on.

For an instant the pilot couldn't believe his eyes, but there was no time to question Pits's decision. Gunfire still raked the air, and Salem could feel steel-jacketed bullets ripping into the Huskie's undersides. Reluctantly, but with no other choice, he armed and fired the cable cutter, slicing the hoist and separating himself from the basket and the survivors on the ground. As the craft limped up and veered west over the jungle, Salem took a last look down at the clearing. There, standing tall, was Pits, briskly waving his right arm. A pistol was clenched in his left hand.

With both power and rpms raging at maximum levels, and with his rudder controls locked, the pilot fought the buffeting Huskie to Binh Ba and made a running, emergency landing. But he couldn't shut down the engine. It was finally stopped by Airman Hammon, who removed a few panels in the roof of the

cabin and beat the fuel controls closed with a hammer.

They took quick stock of the damaged machine: there were nine holes in the side of the chopper and two of the four rotor blades had been hit. They couldn't fly again without repairs.

The second HH-43F, meanwhile, attempted to get back to the pickup point, but as soon as the enemy's automatic weapons stopped, the Viet Cong began waiking mortars into the area. Allied artillery from about three different points was called in and shells began falling with pinpoint accuracy all around the trapped Americans. The firepower from both sides was so heavy and sustained, Captain Bachman couldn't lower into it, and he turned back for the half-hour flight home to Bien Hoa.

"Looks like Pits and those wounded soldiers are on their own," he observed to co-pilot Ray Murden. Bachman squinted at the sinking sun. "About another hour or so before nightfall. They might have an outside chance to make it through the night. Then maybe we can get back there tomorrow morning."

At the clearing, artillery explosions were ripping up huge showers of dirt and underbrush all around the area, muffling the lighter ground fire. When Pits had finished giving first aid to everyone, he took stock of the ammunition supply. He gave his own pistol to a soldier so badly hurt he couldn't hold a rifle, and then the airman went from man to man, taking bullets and

rifles from those who were dead, unconscious, or too injured to fire, and gave the arms to others still able to fight. Navarro watched him dart about in a half-crouched run. Then Pits vanished into the jungle, only to reappear about ten minutes later with twenty more magazines of rifle ammunition.

He positioned himself in the midst of the wounded men, and together they began to pour out fire at the approaching Viet Cong.

"Pits must have seen the VC," Navarro said later, "because he was the only one using semiautomatic fire. I saw several snipers fall from trees after they were hit by his shots. The rest of us were on full automatic, just spraying the bushes and trees, hoping our bullets would find their mark. But Pits's determination and courage gave us all heart. He just wouldn't give up. He fought with the strength and spirit of ten men."

The minutes dragged on like hours, and the small, tired, ragged squad of Americans fought tenaciously, exchanging round for round with the VC, although they were hopelessly outnumbered and knew it. Finally, mercifully, darkness came, but through the night no one slept.

Damage Charlie Five Company's position had been clearly outlined to Allied artillery units, and all night long they pounded the Viet Cong surrounding the clearing with a terrific shelling from their big guns. Whenever the VC mustered an organized advance they

were blown out of their tracks. It was as if the artillery were being guided in by radar. The bombardment lasted till morning.

Almost with the first streaks of dawn came the far-off whirl of rotor blades.

"They haven't forgotten," Navarro shouted. "They're coming after us."

Within minutes another Huskie hovered overhead and a hoist was lowered. A pararescueman soon was strapping the sergeant into a Stokes' litter basket.

"How many of us did they get?" Navarro asked.

"All but you and one other in your squad," was the solemn answer. "It's a miracle anyone survived. We could see from the air the VC are all around you. You guys must have put up one heck of a scrap."

Then Navarro saw him.

In the middle of the clearing, a few feet away, lay Pits, slumped over his rifle. He was dead. A mountain of spent shells covered the ground around him. Tears came to Navarro's eyes.

"We can thank him," he said in a choked voice, pointing at Pits, "for being alive. If he hadn't stayed with us, nobody would have made it out of here. There's no telling how many VC he took down with him. I've seen a lot of war over here, been in a lot of fighting," Navarro said. "But I've never seen anyone match that kid's courage. He ought to get a medal—the highest they've got!"

"Yeah." The pararescueman nodded. "We heard what he did, back at the base."

They lifted Navarro into the helicopter, then got the other survivor in his squad, and came back for Pits's body before heading home to Bien Hoa. When the final tally was taken, it was learned that only fourteen

A photo taken following the night rescue of the sole survivor of a Vietnamese Air Force helicopter shot down in Vietnam in September 1965. On the left is Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger, who jumped from the HH-43 rescue helicopter and led the man to safety. (*U.S. Air Force*)



Americans of a company of 180 men had escaped the fierce battle uninjured. Most were killed. All others were critically wounded.

Included in the casualty list was one pararescueman—Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger of Piqua, Ohio. He died fulfilling the highest traditions of his outfit, living up to every word of its cherished and dearly paid-for motto:

It is my duty, as a member of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, to save life and to aid the injured. I will be prepared at all times to perform my assigned duties quickly and efficiently, placing these duties before personal desires and comforts.

These things I do that others may live.

On September 22, 1966, General John P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, presented the Air Force Cross, posthumously awarded, to Pitsenbarger's parents. It is America's second highest decoration for valor, and Pits was the first enlisted man ever to receive it.

2 □ VIETNAM: THE CHALLENGE

The war in Vietnam is a strange one in many respects. The United States has hydrogen bombs that could literally blow the small, crescent-shaped Southeast Asian country off the face of the map. Yet only limited use of "conventional" bombs is made. The United States has supersonic jet fighters and bombers that can fly at two, three, four and more times the speed of sound, yet one of the most effective airplanes in the war is an old, propeller-driven Douglas A-1E Skyraider that was almost junked at the end of World War II as being obsolete. On the ground, advanced atomic weapons—great on designers' tables or in the open field—are virtually useless in the steaming jungles and hilly countryside of Vietnam.