



Maj. H. Lewis Smith (right) talks with rescue pilots who brought him out of North Vietnam jungle after his A-1E Skyraider was forced down.

RESCUE crews flying helicopter and amphibious aircraft had made more than 560 "saves" of downed airmen or ground troops, in both North and South Vietnam, before the end of 1966.

The majority of these dramatic, action-packed rescues were under enemy fire, which makes them all the more spectacular. Nearly all of them, whether flown by helicopter or amphibious crews, involved great personal effort and risk of life.

Many involved joint operations by Air Force rescue crews and the ships, helicopters and aircraft of the US Army, Navy, and Republic of Vietnam military services. In fact, joint air rescue activities by Air Force and Navy units had resulted in saving 229 downed pilots from the Gulf of Tonkin, as of November 1966, the Department of Defense noted.

Obviously, personal risks are great for aircrew members involved in the rescue operations throughout Vietnam. And seldom, if ever, is any mention made of what might be termed the battle of "guts." Every airman who flies search and rescue missions faces this personal problem and comes to grips with his natural fears in his own, personal way.

There surely has to be something heart-pounding about hovering over a downed airman or soldier, or being lowered to the ground on a cable to assist a complete stranger in a hostile environment that is alive with the sound of enemy rifle and machine gun fire. To learn to live with this insidious, natural fear—and make a successful rescue—is undoubtedly as great a personal victory as it is a shared one.

In short, the job takes guts, and there has certainly been no shortage of courage among American rescue personnel operating in Southeast Asia. Two ARRS men have won the Air Force Cross for their bravery. One of these medals was given posthumously, to A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, a pararescue medic.

Adapted from news releases issued by Seventh Air Force and Pacific Air Forces writers

VIGNETTES



Pararescuemen A1C Robert D. Bowers and A1C Franklin D. Stevenson spent two hours on ground in North Vietnam after rescuing two recon pilots.

Capt. Donald S. Price, a father of three and coach of a junior swim team at Naha AB, Okinawa, received the Air Force Cross last September for a dramatic rescue in the Gulf of Tonkin in which he nearly lost his life while saving another.

Tragedy And Heroism

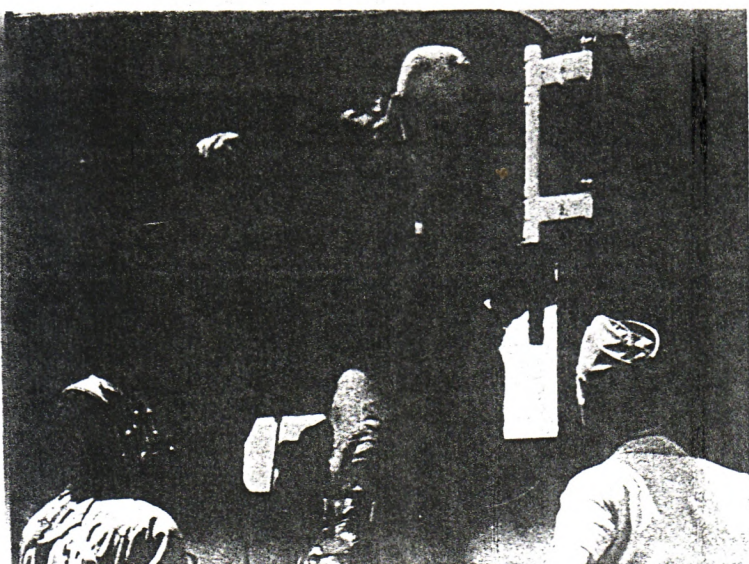
On March 14, 1966, Captain Price, a navigator, and his fellow aircrew members were orbiting over the Gulf of Tonkin in their HU-16 *Albatross*. The crew was on temporary duty in Southeast Asia from Okinawa.

When the distress call came over their radio it began a series of events from which two men did not return. The mayday came from a fighter pilot, reporting the ejection of two fellow F-4 pilots over the gulf, and gave their approximate position.

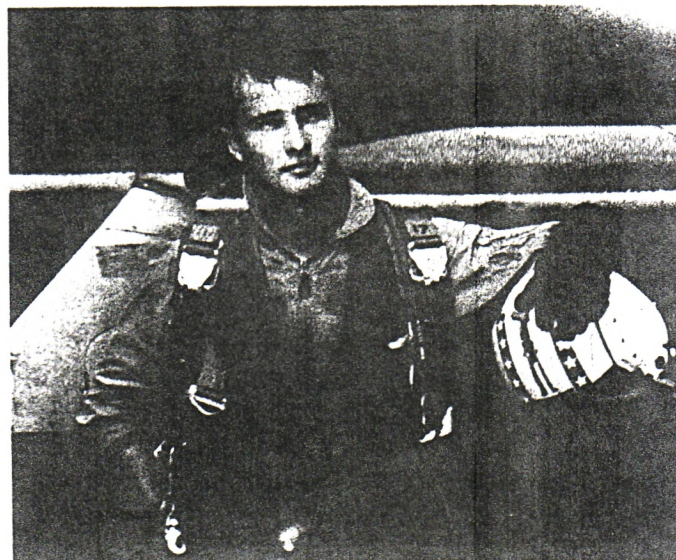
Capt. David Westenbarger, the HU-16's pilot, turned his *Albatross* north toward the downed aviators. En route, he called one of the nearby Search and Rescue (SAR) destroyers and requested two helicopters be

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FROM VIETNAM



Capt. Edward P. Larson leaves HU-16 which picked him and Capt. Kevin A. Gilroy out of sea off Haiphong in hail of point-blank enemy fire.



Lt. Gerald K. Bankus was rescued within 20 seconds after ejecting from his F-100 into the dense Vietnam jungle 40 miles northwest of Saigon.

dispatched to the scene. It was a wise move.

The HU-16 rescuemen spotted the two Air Force pilots in waters about two miles from shore. Captain Westenbarger jettisoned external fuel tanks and full-stalled his aircraft into the water near the pilot closest to shore. Two Navy *Skyriders* circled overhead. Until the HU-16 started to back up, shore batteries had remained silent.

But as soon as the pararescueman aboard the *Albatross* jumped overboard to help bring an injured pilot into the rear hatch, all hell broke loose. The communist gunners opened fire with everything from machine guns to mortars and 105mm howitzers. The sea became a frenzy of erupting shrapnel and water.

Captain Price ran to the rear of the aircraft, ordered the radio operator to assist the flight mechanic in getting the two pilots out of the water, and grabbed an M-16 rifle. He began to return the fire from a communist boat approaching the HU-16.

Then a howitzer round turned the aircraft into a

burning inferno. Captain Price was knocked against the aft bulkhead and momentarily stunned. When he looked up, he saw that his radio operator was dead near the rear door. The flight mechanic was gone, apparently blown out of the door.

As he got up, Captain Price was hit by the flash from igniting JATO units. His hair and face were seared, but he scrambled out the hatch, caught the injured pilot there, and towed him away from the burning seaplane.

The pararescueman, apparently hit by shrapnel, floated dead in the water. Safely away from the burning aircraft, Captain Price stopped towing the pilot long enough to take stock. He found that he was bleeding, and he burned from his shoulders down his back to his knees from shrapnel hits. The HU-16's copilot, yelling from the water that helicopters were coming, went to assist the flight mechanic, who needed help.

A chopper hovered over them and Captain Price, exhausted and bleeding, helped the half-drowned F-4

pilot into its sling. When he looked around again, only he and the flight mechanic remained in the water. The other helicopter had pulled the copilot aboard before he could tow the sling to the mechanic. Then a helicopter returned and retrieved the airman. A Navy *Sky-raider* was making passes at the beach to draw fire away from the rescue scene. Another helicopter took a hit in its fuel line and was forced to return to its ship.

Alone in the sea, Captain Price swam slowly and painfully for the empty raft nearby. He climbed in, but found the raft was drifting toward shore and the enemy guns, so he got out and swam seaward, towing the raft behind him.

He started to shake, so he got back in the raft and opened his survival radio. He heard the A-1 pilot calling for more air strikes. Two Air Force F-4Cs arrived and started blasting shore batteries and the enemy junks which were approaching Captain Price. They blew one out of the water close enough to the navigator that the concussion raised him out of the water.

The HU-16 had sunk. Captain Price recalled the action which followed:

"I began to shake violently all over for periods of 20 to 30 seconds. I called the Rescap but they didn't answer. I called for anyone who could read me, but still no answer. Then I spotted a chopper coming in low from the northeast."

Captain Price was lifted out of his raft into the helicopter. Inside, he stretched out on his stomach. A flight crewman tore his flight suit away and put gauze compresses on Captain Price's wounds. He was still shaking violently. Two other aircrew men took off their own flight suits and covered him.

Within minutes he was aboard an aircraft carrier, where Navy doctors picked out pieces of shrapnel and stitched his wounds. They couldn't get all the shrapnel, so Captain Price figures he'll be able to predict the weather occasionally. Within two weeks from March 14, 1966, he was back on duty with his outfit in Okinawa. He was later awarded the Air Force Cross.

And, somewhere in the Air Force, an F-4C pilot thanks God for rescuemen like Don Price.

Other Rescue Efforts

Paramedics A2C Robert D. Bowers and A2C Franklin D. Stevson spent nearly two hours in dense undergrowth near a North Vietnamese village before being rescued by a helicopter.

On a rescue mission to recover two RF-4C pilots, Airman Bowers' HH-3E helicopter was forced to leave him on the ground after he had assisted one of the injured pilots into the litter for hoisting aboard the hovering craft.

Hearing automatic fire nearby, Bowers hid in the brush. Then Airman Stevson was lowered to the ground

to search for him. He was almost immediately pinned down by enemy small arms fire and his helicopter was also forced to withdraw. Stevson contacted A-1E *Sky-raiders* in the area and gave directions for an air strike.

Then a third "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter entered the operation and picked up both of the paramedics.

An adviser to the VNAF's 213th Helicopter Squadron, Capt. Paul H. Schnucker, and a Vietnamese lieutenant flew a helicopter into an area near Dong Ha in a medical evacuation mission. Two Marine Corps choppers had already gone down on the mission.

"We were hit when about 50 feet in the air," Captain Schnucker said later. A Vietnamese soldier on board the helicopter was hit in the shoulder and leg, so the crew took him back to the Dong Ha dispensary for medical care. Their oil lines had been damaged, so they switched helicopters.

Going back into the mission area, Captain Schnucker and his VNAF crew took several more rounds in a fuel section, but managed to load 13 casualties aboard and complete the evacuation mission. They went back to the area a third time and evacuated 10 more casualties, then had to abandon their aircraft because it was leaking fuel.

Capt. David W. Haines, 1961 graduate of the Air Force Academy, landed his HU-16 *Albatross* in the South China Sea, close to a Viet Cong-held shoreline, to rescue a downed Vietnamese airman. His HU-16 rescue crew ignored bursting mortar shells raining down around them, and evacuated the VNAF pilot to Da Nang Air Base.

A veteran combat pilot and vice commander of the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing in Vietnam recently compared his own World War II rescue to current rescue operations:

Col. Joel D. Thorvaldson, now an F-4C pilot, was shot down over New Guinea in 1943. "I had to float down river for nine days, even though I was spotted by an observation plane, before I could be rescued. We didn't have choppers then."

Commenting on the dramatic recent rescue of a downed F-105 pilot in North Vietnam—which took 22 minutes—Colonel Thorvaldson said, "During World War II the pilot would have been captured, or might have waited several days and traveled many miles on foot before being picked up."

Colonel Thorvaldson flew 186 combat missions during World War II (he downed three *Zeros* and was credited with six "probables"), and flew 59 combat missions over Korea. He is now flying missions in Vietnam.

These few examples of Air Rescue and Recovery Service's daring and bravery under fire in Vietnam barely begin to tell the dramatic story of combat rescue. THE AIRMAN joins aviators everywhere in saluting the men of ARRS for their heroism and life-saving operations.

—J.A.G.