by SMSgt. JAMES A. GEORGE
The Airman Staff

THE SHORTEST LINE

It led to a distant, war-torn land and several close brushes with death.

LIKE most 18-year-olds with the scent of June graduation corsages still fresh in their nostrils, Duane D. Hackney was undecided.

The basic trainee was faced with selecting a career field that would not only hold his interest for the next four years, but would satisfy his strong desire to be of genuine service to his nation and to the Air Force.

Unable to decide, and impatient with his indecision, Hackney simply chose the shortest line he could find during the career counseling sessions at Lackland AFB, Tex. That short line was deceptive, however. It was to lead him into several encounters with danger thousands of miles away. A scant year and a half later, it also led him back to the US and a formal military parade where a four-star general pinned the Air Force Cross to his blouse.

But waiting in line that hot summer day in 1965, the Flint, Mich., youth who had lettered in football, baseball and swimming at Beecher High School had never heard of the Air Force Cross, the United States' second highest military decoration.

Nor had he any way of knowing that he would also return from Vietnam wearing the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross with two oak leaf clusters, the Airman's Medal, the Air Medal with nine oak leaf clusters, the Air Force Commendation Medal, and the Purple Heart.

Hackney could not have known either that he would be named Airman of the Year in the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service and in its parent Military Airlift Command; or that he would be presented the 1967 Cheney Award for "an act of valor, extreme fortitude, or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest performed in connection with aircraft."

When he approached the end of that career counseling line at Lackland, however, and met the pararescuemen in the maroon berets, Hackney knew suddenly that he had somehow picked exactly the right line to stand in.

Made to Order

The young airman soon discovered that he faced about a year of constant, strenuous training to qualify as a pararescueman. His skills of parachutist, scuba diver, medic, mountain climber, survival specialist and other rescue and recovery techniques were carefully and painstakingly woven together in a series of training schools that helped qualify him for his extraordinary job.

The learning process for a PJ is physically and mentally demanding and the candidate for the pararescueman's badge must be thoroughly convinced that this is what he really wants to do—or odds are that he won't make it. Duane Hackney never doubted for a minute his desire, or his ability, to meet these demands. He volunteered for duty with Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service units in Southeast Asia even before he received his maroon beret and pararescueman's badge.

Almost before he could say "Jolly Green Giant" he was on his way to Da Nang Air Base in Vietnam for duty with the 37th ARR Squadron. He began

flying missions immediately. On his 10th mission, in April 1966, he was hit by an enemy bullet while pulling a wounded Marine aboard his HH-3E Jolly Green Giant. His flight helmet probably saved his life.

"The round knocked me down," Hackney recalled later. "As I fell I pulled both of my legs up for balance. About that time another enemy bullet went through the pocket on the right side of my flight suit. It shattered my survival radio." The tense action took place about two miles south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), where a Marine helicopter had been downed by enemy ground fire.

"When we arrived at the scene we orbited the area while another Marine helicopter tried to pick up the downed crew. Unfortunately, the second chopper was also downed by enemy fire. Then, two flights of A-1E *Skyraiders* came in. They plastered the area to suppress ground fire, and dropped smoke to help cover our rescue efforts.

"We went in through the smoke and dropped the hoist. There was no ground fire at all, and it looked like an easy pickup. So the men on the ground sent up their most seriously wounded man first. Just as he reached the bottom of our helicopter we started taking small arms and automatic weapons fire.

"I was bent over in the hatchway, trying to pull the wounded man in, when the bullet hit my helmet." Back on his feet within a few seconds, Hackney pulled the man inside and placed himself between the Marine and the open hatch while he began first aid treatment.

The HH-3E had taken several damaging hits during the rescue, however, and was forced to withdraw. The crew made an emergency landing at nearby Dong Ha. Both Hackney and the wounded Marine were taken to a field hospital there, but the young PJ was released within minutes and returned to duty. Next day, helicopter rescue men from other units picked up the remaining men at the scene of the multiple crash.

That 10th mission was memorable, but not nearly as vivid in Hackney's memory as the mission nearly a year later when he was blown out of his helicopter—the mission which won him the Air Force Cross.

It started early on the morning of February 6, 1967. A pilot was down in the dense jungle near Mu Gia Pass in North Vietnam. There had reportedly been some voice (radio) contact with him, but apparently he had not been spotted from the air.

"He was down at the bottom of a pass, covered by three canopies of jungle growth," Hackney said. "Clouds were low, making it difficult to see very much of anything." The rescue HH-3E circled over the area as crew members searched anxiously for some sign of the pilot. Then Hackney spotted something below — something shining and asked if he could go down and look.

"There was flak all around us, but it was falling short," he remembered. The 6-foot, 180-pound PJ waited until his pilot jockeyed the Jolly Green Giant into position above the jungle, then rode the penetrator hoist to the ground and began pushing his way through the dark, heavy foliage.

Stumbling over rocks and roots, Hackney moved slowly through the dense growth. Finally, he found footprints that had obviously been made by American combat boots.

"I wanted to call out, but I was afraid I'd get Uncle Ho's (Ho Chi Minh) boys on me." He followed the prints but found nothing except a piece of tinsel. Then he was contacted by his crew and told to return to the copter. Disappointed, but low on fuel, they flew back to a forward operating base. Later that afternoon

Two months after mission that earned him the Air Force Cross, Hackney readies for more action.

A month after being blown out of his helicopter, Hackney (kneeling) was photographed with HH-3E rescue crew that picked up Capt. Robert C. Mays (behind Hackney) after 49 hours in jungle.

the crew was called out again for another try. Air Force pilots had spotted the downed flyer and marked his position. Two HH-3E helicopters headed for the area.

"This time we saw him," Hackney said. "I went down to help him get on the hoist. We made it up the hoist together and into the Jolly Green. I was bending over him, trying to treat his abrasions, when the flak hit us.

"There was smoke and flames everywhere. The pilot we had just rescued reached out an arm. I grabbed a parachute and put it on him as fast as I could (Hackney gave the airman his own chute). Then I found one for myself. I had it partially on when the second round of flak hit us."

Aircrew members in other USAF aircraft at the rescue site said later that the HH-3E was engulfed in flames and that there were gaping holes in the pilot's and copilot's areas of the cabin. Hackney didn't see the damage to his aircraft, however. He was suddenly dumped into open space, just a few hundred feet above the top tier of jungle growth.

"The sudden pressure (from the explosion) threw me back—hard. I felt a sharp pain in my left arm. I remember reaching for the door. Next thing I saw was the helicopter—*from outside*. I'd been blown out the rear door."

Trained to survive, Hackney reacted swiftly to his training. He pulled the D-ring on his chute, and hugged the unbuckled harness tight under his arms to keep from slipping out. As he hit the highest of the jungle trees, the chute opened just enough to break his fall. His crash through the branches was halted with a jolt when the chute risers snagged in the treetops. He freed himself from the harness and half climbed, half slid to the ground. He was the only survivor from the HH-3E.

"I guess I looked pretty rotten," Hackney said later. "I had blackened my face to prevent detection. My left arm and back were bleeding and burned and my right arm was rubbed raw." In addition to flash burns, the PJ had taken a few shrapnel hits.

"I knew the other helicopter would come back for me—either later in the afternoon or the next day." So the 19-year-old veteran of some 200 rescue missions in Vietnam began taking stock of his situation.

"I had my medical pouch with me, a pistol with six rounds of ammo, and some pencil smoke flares. I'd been wearing my camouflaged flight helmet when we were hit, but it was gone. When I heard sounds in the jungle I was worried, but I didn't see anything." Hackney wasn't worried about being picked up. He was more concerned about a Valentine card. It had cost him a buck and now he wondered if he would be able to send it to his girl friend in time.

Minutes later he heard an aircraft engine, then a US Air Force plane flew almost directly over him. "I got out the red smoke flare, opened it to mark my position, and found a pretty good spot to wait out the helicopter that I was sure would be arriving soon."

Actually, he was on the ground only about 30 minutes from the time he plummeted into the jungle trees until another HH-3E came in to pick him up. A former classmate in PJ training schools, A2C Luther Davis, came down the hoist to get Hackney out of the jungle.

The end of a long and hair-raising day was almost over as the Jolly Green Giant raced for an air base in Thailand, but Hackney had one more "scare" in store for him. At the base dispensary a reading of his blood pressure showed that it was extremely high—210 over 180. But the exhausted Hackney had gone "out like a light" on a hospital stretcher.

When he heard a medical technician yelling for the doctor because he thought the young PJ had died, Hackney woke up suddenly. "That really scared me," he said.

February 6, 1967, was a day that Sgt. Duane D. Hackney will always remember. It was a day on which he nearly lost his life; a day when he did lose some of his closest friends after their helicopter was blown out of the sky. It was also a day when a young pararescueman had helped save a pilot's life, only to lose the man minutes later; and a day when it was the PJ's turn to be rescued. That Hackney survived his sudden, low-level "bailout" was a near-miracle. It was also a tribute to the thoroughness of his training.

Today, the 21-year-old pararescueman is assigned to the 41st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Hamilton AFB, Calif. He has been awarded the Air Force Cross and numerous other decorations; has toured Military Airlift Command bases as the MAC Airman of the Year; was introduced to millions of TV viewers on *The Ed Sullivan Show;* was guest of honor during Hackney Day in Detroit, Mich.; received the coveted Cheney Award; and has had his fill of being a celebrity.

And it all started that day in June 1965, when Airman Basic Duane Hackney went to stand in the shortest counseling line he could find at Lackland AFB, Tex.

For Extraordinary Heroism

The story of Sgt. Duane D. Hackney is the first in a series of planned articles about US Air Force men who have been awarded the Air Force Cross, presented "for extraordinary heroism not justifying the award of the Medal of Honor. . . ."

Ninety-two* USAF officers and enlisted men have been awarded the Air Force Cross since it was authorized by the Congress on July 6, 1960. The first eight awards were made posthumously—the first to Maj. Rudolf Anderson, Jr., killed while flying a reconnaissance mission over Cuba in 1962.

The first enlisted man to be presented the Air Force Cross was honored posthumously. A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, a pararescueman, gave his life while attempting to save others. Sergeant Hackney was the first *living* enlisted man to be presented the Air Force Cross. As this article was prepared, only one other enlisted man—Sgt. Russell M. Hunt—has been presented the medal.

THE AIRMAN welcomes any information from readers that will assist us in the preparation of stories about the gallant airmen who have received the Air Force Cross. This information would be especially helpful in recreating the stories of those honored posthumously.

* As of August 23, 1968.