

Our Nation's Youngest Service's
Newest Award for Valor

The AIR FORCE CROSS

by SMSgt Edwin J. Kosier



Major Rudolf Anderson Jr. and Airman First Class Duane D. Hackney have something in common. Major Anderson was the first to receive the Air Force Cross; Airman Hackney is the first living enlisted airman to be presented the Nation's second highest decoration. But unlike Hackney, Major Anderson was not personally presented the Air Force Cross—he died in his act of heroism.

Major Anderson was shot down over Cuba on Oct. 27, 1962, while on an aerial reconnaissance mission. His previous flights in the unarmed, unescorted U-2 provided photographs showing the introduction of long-range offensive missiles into Cuba. This evidence assisted United States leaders in charting the Nation's military and diplomatic course during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962.

Fourteen days later, an urgent call from the White House to the Institute of Heraldry in Washington, D.C., requested an Air Force Cross. The following day the manufacturer produced one especially for the occasion. It was

rushed from New York to Washington and presented by President Kennedy to the bereaved family of Major Anderson.

Four years later, Airman Hackney was standing at attention in his jump boots while General Howell M. Estes Jr., commander of the Military Airlift Command, pinned on the Air Force Cross. The only other Air Force enlisted airman to earn the Air Force Cross was A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, a fellow pararescuer killed in a fierce jungle fight near Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, in April 1966.

Airman Hackney, who flew over 200 rescue missions in an Air Force HH-3E *Jolly Green Giant* helicopter, was cited for his heroic efforts in saving the life of a downed pilot.

Unable to spot the pilot in the dense jungle of North Vietnam's Mu Gia Pass in February, Hackney volunteered to leave the helicopter to make a ground search. He found footprints, but low cloud cover forced his return to the helicopter.

Returning that afternoon, Airman Hackney



Airman First Class Duane D. Hackney, who was the first enlisted airman to be awarded the Air Force Cross, checks over a jungle penetrator from his HH-3E Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopter in Vietnam. The penetrator, which opens into a seat, is lowered on the end of a cable to downed pilots who are then hoisted into the helicopter.

made his second search. Within 15 minutes he located the pilot and assisted in lifting him to the helicopter.

Minutes later, the 20-year-old airman was treating the pilot's abrasions when the helicopter was hit by flak, causing extensive damage and fire. While placing a parachute on the rescued pilot, Airman Hackney was hit by small arms fire and knocked out of the helicopter. His chute failed to open completely, but luckily the heavy foliage helped break his more than 200-foot fall.

Hours later, A-1E *Skyriders* spotted Airman Hackney by a smoke flare he had released. Fellow pararescuemen of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron then flew in and rescued the dazed and wounded airman.

Major Anderson's and Airman Hackney's stories are typical of those who have won the Air Force Cross—an act of heroism that is just a hair away from what it takes to deserve or earn the Medal of Honor.

In fact, the Air Force regulation governing the award of the medal says: "The Air Force Cross is awarded for extraordinary heroism not justifying the award of the Medal of Honor, while serving in any capacity with the Air Force; while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States; while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force; or while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in an armed conflict against an opposing force in which the United States is not a belligerent party."

Some fifty awards of the Air Force Cross have been made to date. All, with the exception of Major Anderson's, have been approved and presented since the beginning of the war in Southeast Asia; many of them posthumously.

MANY RECIPIENTS UNPUBLICIZED

One airman has been awarded the Air Force Cross twice. Many have been awarded the medal and are not wearing it—they are in prisoner of war camps in North Vietnam. Their names cannot be published. Information pertaining to the award of the Air Force Cross to these individuals in missing or captured status must not be publicized until Headquarters U.S. Air Force officially announces a final determination of the recipients' status.

Typical of other airmen who have been awarded the Air Force Cross in the Southeast Asia conflict are Captains Willard M. Collins, Oliver E. O'Mara, Donald S. Price, and Major Leland T. Kennedy.

Their stories:

Captain Collins was an AC-47 *Dragon-ship* aircraft commander who was scrambled in defense of a special forces camp that came under heavy attack on March 9, 1966.

Arriving over A Shau valley, which was obscured by heavy clouds, Capt. Collins attempted to locate the camp. On his third approach, he entered the valley at tree top level and managed to see the sieged outpost.

He made two firing passes at the Viet Cong. It was on the second pass that both engines exploded from the impact of ground fire. Demonstrating superb airmanship, Capt. Collins successfully crash-landed his battle-torn *Dragon-ship*.

After landing, Capt. Collins rallied his crew and attempted to establish defense positions