

CAPT. Robert E. Patterson was about to start a day that would find him drawing on more than his share of miracles.

The temperature hovered around 100 degrees on the flight line of the giant air base in Northeast Thailand. It was the first day of summer, June 21, 1967, and Bob had been in Thailand since January. Thus far, he had flown 64 unarmed photoreconnaissance missions over North Vietnam. It was a deadly game in which Air Force recon pilots daily matched wits, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and courage against North Vietnamese anti-aircraft artillery gunners, surface-to-air missile crews, and *Mig* fighter pilots. What's more, their recon jets didn't carry a single bomb, rocket, missile or gun. Just a camera.

"If I finish a hundred missions over the North before the end of a year, I'll go home early," thought Patterson as he moved toward his RF-101. He was averaging a mission over the North every other day and at that rate he expected to be home for Labor Day. In fact his wife, Brigitte, and the children, Bob and Lynn, were looking forward to it. They would be able to move into their new home and enter school at the beginning of the fall term.

"Let's go, Bob!" yelled Maj.

Homer R. Hunt as he strapped himself into the cockpit of his RF-101 *Voodoo* parked beside Patterson's. Bob and Homer were close friends. They frequently flew missions together and today Hunt would lead the flight of two RF-101s. Bob was wingman. Both pilots gave the thumbs-up signal for "ready," then taxied their twin-engine jets out for takeoff. As they turned toward the active runway, they passed two A-1E *Skyraiders* also ready to depart on a mission over the North.

Hunt released his brakes and began the mile-long takeoff roll. After a few seconds delay for spacing, Bob did likewise, following him down the heat-rippled runway. Quickly airborne, the flight leader started a slow turn to the North. Patterson moved into position off Major Hunt's left wing.

The two *Skyraiders*, or "Sandys," took off a few minutes later and also headed for North Vietnam. The jets would beat the heavy bomb-laden A-1Es to North Vietnam by 30 to 40 minutes. Unknown to either the RF-101 or A-1E pilots, the fate of all four would be closely entwined before the sun set. Recon pilots sometimes joke about their motto, "Alone, unarmed and unafraid." They say it should be "alone, unarmed and scared like hell." Nevertheless, these dedicated pilots daily penetrated the heart of North Vietnam to take photographs vital for mission planning and for bomb damage assessment.



Captain Patterson

First there was the SAM and the bailout. Then there was the karst and the jungle, and then . . . well, just call it

THREE MIRACLES

Today's photorecon mission was over the outskirts of Hanoi. Hunt and Patterson didn't expect it would be any different from many other such missions. They knew that the flak, missiles, and *Mig* fighters would be waiting when they entered North Vietnam.

They were right. Moments after they crossed the border, a volley of surface-to-air missiles filled the air around them. The SAMs were painted white, loaded with high explosives, and aimed at their aircraft.

"I'm hit! I'm hit!" Patterson's shout crackled in Hunt's earphones. One of the missiles had exploded directly below Bob's aircraft. Metal fragments ripped through the engine and fuel tanks, which immediately burst into flame. The bright red glow of both fire-warning lights glowed through thick smoke, which quickly filled the cockpit. His plane reeled out of control five miles above the earth, hostile earth at that.

"You're on fire! Bailout! Bailout, Pat!" yelled Hunt.

Scorching flames from burning jet fuel lapped at the back of Patterson's neck. He squeezed the emergency bailout triggers. The jet's canopy blew off and the explosive charge under the ejection seat fired, propelling the seat and its occupant upward a hundred feet. Patterson, now safely away from the burning jet, saw it explode.

Patterson's arms and legs flailed wildly in the slipstream. His oxygen mask was torn off. And his helmet.

As the ejection seat automatically dropped away from him, he grasped the ripcord on his chute and gave a frantic tug. The parachute popped open. Meanwhile, Homer Hunt was

busy dodging missiles himself. He did not see Patterson leave the burning aircraft and as the doomed jet exploded, Hunt groaned to himself, "My God! My wingman!"

Except for a generous supply of bruises and a burned neck, Bob Patterson was in good shape. He had miraculously survived an exploding jet, and a high-altitude, high-speed bailout.

"The worst has got to be over!" Patterson thought. But he was wrong. He was drifting toward the very missile site that shot him down. And he knew the large green valley surrounding the missile site spelled death or imprisonment. No rescue force could possibly get near enough to pick him up. Even if they tried, the missiles or flak would probably shoot them down.

Then, an idea. "If I can only come down on the south side of that high ridge, I might have a chance."

His hands, chilled by the sub-zero temperatures at the high altitude, ached as he grasped the left rear riser and climbed toward the skirt of the parachute canopy. The bright orange and white canopy tilted. Overcoming the gentle breeze, it slipped southward toward the ridge skirting the well defended valley.

Despite the pain, he held on until he was sure he would land on the

south side of the ridge. Then he relaxed his grip and slid down until the harness again supported his weight. He took out his survival radio and turned it on. Homer Hunt was already in contact with another aircraft, telling its pilot that his wingman had not ejected from the aircraft before it exploded. At least he did not see him eject.

By this time, Patterson was only a few hundred feet above the jungle. He realized that a rescue might not be tried in this area if everyone thought that he was dead. He had to contact Hunt before hitting the ground. There was only time for one quick call on his radio. He could not be sure whether Hunt heard it.

Suddenly Patterson faced another problem. How to land safely in the rugged jungle and karst formation? Karst is the coral-like limestone outcroppings covering much of the North Vietnamese landscape. Patterson knew that many pilots had bailed out safely, only to be slammed to death against jagged karst. He looked for a clear, level spot to land, but found none. He steered his parachute toward a large group of tall trees, hoping they would cushion his fall.

With toes pointed toward the tree-tops, and knees bent slightly, he carefully covered his face with his arms. He remembered survival courses stressing this as the correct body position for a tree landing.

"Feet tight together. Don't want to straddle a limb," he thought as he slipped through the top-layer. To his amazement another layer of

IN ONE DAY

by Maj. JIMMY W. KILBOURNE, Hq USAF

branches and treetops greeted him. He hoped his parachute would hang up in the top layer. If so, he could easily lower himself to the jungle floor. The parachute hesitated for a split second, then dropped to the next layer. "What next?" he wondered. He forced himself to stay relaxed as he dropped toward the ground.

"I have to make a good landing. I don't even have a helmet," he remembered as he was slammed against the sharp karst. He lay still for a few seconds, aching all over. "A broken leg is all I need," he thought. But to his great relief, he found no broken bones.

Two miracles in one day!

Patterson had survived the high-speed bailout and descent from 27,000 feet without oxygen. And he had been slammed against the karst floor of the jungle and emerged uninjured. Would it be too much to hope for a third miracle? Could he be rescued from within range of an active, accurate missile site? Such a feat had never been done as far as he knew. *Had Homer Hunt received his call?*

Although still within range of the missile site, Major Hunt circled above reporting the missile firing and Patterson's position. He *had* heard Patterson's call and knew full well that Patterson would not have a chance of being rescued if he left the area.

Major Gould and I were en route to a nearby target in our Sandys

when Hunt made the first emergency call. It was answered by Maj. Robert Gould, pilot of one of the A-1Es that took off shortly after Patterson and Hunt. Gould volunteered to lead a rescue effort. The two Sandys were directed into the area by Major Hunt.

The A-1Es joined two HH-3 "Jolly Green Giants" after arranging for a flight of jet fighters to protect the force from *Migs*. One A-1E remained with the helicopters while the other descended into the valley to search for Patterson. The fighters — two F-104s — flew protective cover at 14,000 feet, and watched for signs of missile firings.

Gould, who was piloting the A-1E looking for Patterson, flew a criss-cross pattern at treetop level for an hour without success. Even though the search pattern was nearing the missile site, he would not give up.

Four more Sandys had been launched when Patterson went down, and they now arrived in the area. Gould briefed them on the situation. Then he and the other original A-1E, both low on fuel, turned toward their home base.

In the meantime, Patterson was feverishly trying to make his way to higher ground where his radio transmissions would not be blocked by the karst formations. The going was extremely difficult. And in his state of exhaustion, shock, and pain, he had made little headway in two hours. Finally he heard the drone of a lone Sandy. For the first time he realized a rescue effort was actually in progress. He clawed his way toward the top of a jagged cliff and radioed the rescue force.

His radio call was like a magnet! Everyone pointed their aircraft toward his position.

"SAMs! SAMs!" screamed the F-104 pilot over the radio. "They're

coming off the pads! Take cover! Repeat! SAMs! SAMs! Take cover!"

Seconds later a missile exploded above the helicopter. But everyone had taken cover in time.

Patterson heard the frantic SAM warning on his emergency frequency. He also heard the missiles lift off the nearby pads and break the sound barrier overhead as they streaked skyward. He was less than five miles from the site.

He was certain that someone else had been shot down by the exploding missile. The engine noise from the rescue force faded into the distance. "I'll never get home," he thought, and wondered about those who had tried to rescue him.

An enemy SAM site is pretty ominous-looking to a pilot, even when he sees it from his fast-flying RF-101, as did the pilot who made this photo. But Captain Patterson had an even more chilling view; from a parachute almost directly above the site.

The A-1Es and rescue helicopters had resumed the search and soon located Patterson perched on the side of a steep karst formation.

The RF-101 pilot was jubilant when he saw them. He jumped up and down, waving his arms. He grabbed his radio and shouted, "You're right over me! Don't go away!"

"Light a smoke flare so I can check the winds," radioed Capt. John A. Firse, the helicopter pilot.

The rescue business was not new to Firse. He had won the Air Force Cross just 10 days earlier by rescuing two A-1E pilots from deep inside North Vietnam.

Patterson lit the flare. The smoke billowed up and around the karst, indicating turbulent air currents. Firse would not be able to use the wind to any advantage.

"I have you in sight. Have you heard ground fire or enemy activity?" asked Firse.

Patterson assured him that all was quiet.

Firse brought the helicopter to a hover. The karst was too steep for him to hover directly over Patterson. The rotor blades would have struck the rocks and trees. As it was, Firse held a delicate balance in the gusty wind just a few feet from the edge of a steep overhang. He was careful to keep the ridge between his chopper and the missile site, only a few miles to the north.

Coolly the flight mechanic lowered the sling and started a slow pen-

dulum motion, which worked it over to Patterson. Patterson grabbed the sling, lowered the seat, and hung on. He gave the thumbs-up signal and braced for the wildest ride of his life. He swayed back and forth, suspended 200 feet beneath the helicopter as it lurched skyward.

"Incredible! They'll fire any second," thought Patterson. But they did not. At least no one was hit. The spectacular ride was soon over. He could see the smiles of the rescuemen in the door of the helicopter as they reeled in the sling. They pulled him inside. The pararescuemen fastened him to a seat as the flight mechanic watched for ground fire.

Patterson was thirsty. But thankful to be alive. He drank a quart of water as the helicopter headed home.

At the club that evening, Patterson shook hands, poured champagne, and said, "You guys are the greatest. And Hunt, you were too! I'm damned lucky to be alive."

Indeed he was. But then few men experience three miracles in one day.

(Editor's Note: On a subsequent mission Captain Patterson again was forced to bail out over enemy territory. He broke a leg upon landing, but was soon located by a Jolly Green helicopter. Then, however, the Jolly Green lost power and was forced to land. A backup chopper finally came in to pick up Patterson and the crew of the disabled helicopter. The lucky captain returned to the States shortly thereafter.)

