

*Veterans Day 1967. Two pilots down
in an enemy stronghold. Still, the
colonel vowed there would be*

NO TAPS FOR THESE VETERANS

by Maj. JIMMY W. KILBOURNE, Hq. USAF

"Griff's down, and Hoggatt's all shot up!" yelled Col. Joe Guthrie as I entered the 602d Fighter Squadron's operations section on the morning of November 11, 1967.

"They got Griff with flak near Mu Gia Pass in North Vietnam. Jubilation, can you scramble immediately, civilian clothes and all?"

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"Good. Grab a chute and pile in the jeep. I'll brief you on the way to the plane."

I grabbed a parachute, jumped in the jeep, and buckled the leg straps as we raced along the Udorn RTAFB flight line.

"This is the picture, Jube. Griff was shot down while he and Hoggatt were looking for an F-4C crew near Mu Gia Pass. The 'Jolly Greens' picked him up right away and they're on their way to NKP. Ralph Hoggatt got his airplane shot up covering Griff's recovery. He's about 15 minutes east of here, and may not be able to make it down safely. I want you to

talk him down or cover him if he bails out."

Colonel Guthrie skidded the jeep to a halt alongside an A-1H. I leaped aboard and was on Hoggatt's wing in 10 minutes. There were several large gaping holes in the engine cowling, wings, fuselage, and underbelly of his airplane. It was a miracle that the A-1E was still airborne.

"Ralph, she looks okay to me except for fuel, oil, and hydraulic fluid seeping back toward the tail. How much fuel do you have, and how are the engine instruments?" I asked.

"Hydraulic pressure's zero. I've got about 15 minutes fuel remaining, and I can't get the gear down."

"Try to lower it with the emergency system," I yelled.

"I've tried that. How long will it take them to foam the runway?"

"Ten minutes," Udorn tower cut in.

"I think I can stay up that long. But hurry! This fool thing may come apart any minute."

Immediately, giant red fire trucks began racing up and down the runway, spreading a six-inch layer of thick gray foam for Hoggatt's riddled A-1E to skid to a stop on without catching fire or breaking up.

Meanwhile, he and I circled the field for about five minutes, dodging clouds and rain showers and watching the fire trucks. It seemed like an eternity.

"Sandy 7, this is Udorn tower. What is your condition now?" they asked the colonel.

"The same battle damage as before, and five minutes less fuel. How are they doing with that foam? I've got to land!" Ralph's voice was becoming strained.

"The first 3,000 feet of the runway is covered with foam. Have you completed the crash landing check list?"

"Check list's completed and tail hook is down."

"You're clear to land. Call turning final approach."

"The fire trucks and ambulance will follow you down the runway. Good luck," said the tower operator.

Colonel Hoggatt turned on final and reduced power on the straining engine. He gritted his teeth—this would be his first crash in more than 20 years of flying. The thought was nauseating. But he was helpless.

Everyone waited as the A-1E settled toward the runway. Hopefully it would skid safely to a stop. Then just at that moment the landing gear fell into place!

"Your gear's down!" yelled the tower operator. But the message didn't register on Colonel Hoggatt.

The tail hook caught the barrier and slowed the A-1E to a stop.

Colonel Hoggatt shut down the engine, crawled out of the airplane, and shook his head in disbelief as he surveyed the damaged A-1E.

He had just earned the 13th Air Force "Well Done Award" for his outstanding display of airmanship in nursing a heavily damaged A-1E across 150 miles of jungle and making a perfect emergency landing. But the real story had begun three hours earlier, when he began the mission for which he won the Air Force Cross.

Nobody should have been surprised about Ralph Hoggatt getting the Air Force Cross. After all he wears the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal and has much combat experience. He left his hometown of Marshalltown, Iowa, in 1942, was commissioned in May 1944 at age 20, and then flew B-24s with the Eighth Air Force in Europe during World War II. Later, he ferried aircraft with ATC until released from active duty in 1946.

Colonel Hoggatt spent the next five years at the University of Colorado where he received a B.A. degree in psychology in 1949 and worked as the Assistant Director of Veterans Affairs until recalled to active duty in 1951.

For the next six years he was stationed in San Antonio, Tex.; Minot, N. Dak.; and Korea with various AC&W units prior to joining the Military Airlift Command where he flew C-124s and C-133s. Then, in 1964, he joined the Air Force Personnel Research Laboratory as a research psychologist after receiving his master's degree in psychology from Oklahoma State University. While with the Laboratory, Colonel Hoggatt published many technical papers and completed most of the requirements for the Ph.D. in psychology with the University of Texas prior to leaving the Air Force Personnel Research Laboratory in 1967.

His interesting and diversified Air Force career had already spanned a quarter century prior to his joining the 602d Fighter Squadron (Commando) in August 1967.

HE had been with the 602d less than three months when he and his wingman, Maj. William C. Griffith, were scrambled on a search and rescue mission on November 11, 1967. They took off in their A-1E Skyraiders along with two Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters in an effort to locate and rescue an F-4C crew downed by ground fire near Mu Gia Pass.

The rescue force, with Colonel Hoggatt as on-scene commander, arrived in the area of the downed F-4C at 0730 local. The area was blanketed with broken clouds and fog. Colonel Hoggatt led the rescue force down through a hole and ordered the Jolly Greens to hold over a relatively safe area while he and Major Griffith conducted a visual search for the survivors.

They soon established voice contact with one of the survivors. But contact was never established with the second. The downed pilot was in a major staging area, one of the most hostile in all of Southeast Asia. It was known to contain numerous antiaircraft artillery positions and thousands of troops armed with automatic weapons. The 500- to 1,500-foot ceilings and low visibility virtually eliminated jet fighter support and the heavily defended troop bivouac and supply storage area along with this important enemy infiltration route appeared invincible.

Nevertheless, Colonel Hoggatt set about the arduous task of visually locating the survivor and suppressing enemy ground fire before calling in the Jolly Greens for a pick up attempt. Again and again he flew a low-level crisscross search pattern for the downed pilot. In effect, he was "trolling" for ground fire while searching for the survivor.

Meanwhile, Major Griffith remained about 1,000 feet above and behind Colonel Hoggatt in a turning pattern to keep him in sight and to watch for ground fire.

"We had been in the area for about five minutes when I caught two direct hits in the center of the aircraft," Griffith recalls. "I heard two loud explosions and felt the aircraft choke with each one." The exploding shells engulfed the A-1E in flames and sent it spiraling out of control. The major ejected near the enemy gunners before he could warn Colonel Hoggatt.

Col. Raymond C. Lee, Jr., then vice commander of the 31st TFW, was flying an F-100 "Misty" FAC mission over Hue that morning. He was notified that a rescue effort was in progress near Mu Gia Pass.

"We were told that a rescue was going on—two downed F-4C pilots—and they needed our help," Colonel Lee said. "We streaked over and watched for gunfire. (Maj. Don Sibson was with Colonel Lee.) The downed pilots were near a good road at a river crossing with steep escarpments on the north side. We drew heavy gunfire from hills by the river. One Sandy (Major Griffith) was shot down before our eyes. We followed his burning aircraft and saw him eject just before he hit."

Colonel Hoggatt rounded a karst formation (a limestone outcropping) and to his surprise saw his wingman floating down in a parachute. He immediately suspended the rescue effort for the F-4C crew, and despite a barrage of ground fire, flew a defensive ring around Major Griffith.

HOGGATT at this point would have been justified in suspending the entire rescue effort. The enemy had not only demonstrated the ability to shoot down the high performance F-4C, but also the A-1E. He realized, however, that the only chance to rescue his wingman was to make a brazen attack against the enemy gunners surrounding Major Griffith, driving them away from their guns. Hopefully, this would permit the Jolly Green a few minutes to dart in, pick up Major Griffith, and dart out. Hoggatt elected to remain.

Although alone and plagued with low clouds that permitted only intermittent jet support, he attacked the overwhelming enemy defenses, despite taking crippling battle damage on virtually every pass. Moreover, his ordnance load—rockets, smoke bombs, and 20mm cannons—although suited for use against troops and small arms, was never intended for use against well dug in antiaircraft artillery positions.

Still Hoggatt attacked the enemy gunners, permitting the Jolly Green to approach Griffith's position. But, as 1st Lt. James H. Platt and his Jolly Green crew entered the area, 20 to 25 37mm shells exploded around their helicopter. Platt darted behind a ridge momentarily and then once again proceeded toward Griffith, this time taking a different route as Colonel Hoggatt once more pounded the enemy gunners.

Platt entered a hover only to learn that Griffith was entangled in vines some 30 feet above the ground. A1C Roy A. Taylor, the pararescueman, descended on the penetrator and cut the major loose.

This delicate operation, with Taylor dangling nearly 100 feet below the helicopter, took about 20 minutes and exposed the Jolly Green to the enemy gunners who managed to score several hits despite Hoggatt's constant suppressive fire. Eventually, Griffith was freed and he and Taylor were hauled aboard the Jolly Green. Hoggatt then cleared a path for the helicopter's safe withdrawal.

Normally, a rescue force would have withdrawn under such circumstances. But Colonel Hoggatt, having dealt successfully with this diversion, returned to search for the crew of the F-4C despite his heavily damaged A-1E and the fact he was still alone. He realized that initial efforts to locate the downed pilot and enemy gunners had cost an A-1E. But he would not withdraw and cause his replacements, now en route to the area, to face the same problems that he had faced an hour earlier. He knew generally where the enemy gunners were and where the downed pilot was hiding. Therefore, he decided to continue his attack against the many gunners. He could also brief the incoming A-1E *Skyraiders*.

Contact with the survivor was reestablished and Colonel Hoggatt was soon joined by two A-1Es who helped him blanket the larger guns with bombs and rockets while narrowing the search even further during the next hour.

Hoggatt's reserve fuel supply was finally depleted and he was forced to withdraw as the location of the survivor was narrowed to approximately 100 feet. He limped off across 150 miles of jungle to the safe landing at his home base.

The rescue effort, however, continued throughout the day. Seven of the 14 participating A-1Es sustained battle damage—one had an aileron shot away with a 37mm shell in addition to the loss of Major Griffith's A-1E. The five Jolly Greens sustained upwards of 75 hits while attempting to recover the F-4C pilot and Major Griffith. All in all, the effort was one of the largest on record, ultimately comprising more than 60 aircraft. Unfortunately, the F-4C crew was never rescued.

But gallantry and heroism were commonplace—and symbolic—on that Veterans Day in 1967. Colonel Hoggatt's ready acceptance of danger, his disregard for his own life, and his devotion to duty in an effort to rescue comrades was in the finest tradition of the Air Force. The Air Force Cross and the 13th Air Force "Well Done Award" were well deserved.

And Veterans Day will always have that extra meaning for him.

