

AIR FORCE CROSS RECIPIENT

Airman First Class Joel E. Talley, 21, Farmland, Indiana, receives congratulations from General Howell M. Estes Jr., Commander, Military Airlift Command, after the General presented him the Air Force Cross.



2Jul68: interesting fact - of the roughly 200 Air Force Cross recipients, only 24 are enlisted rank, of which 12 are Pararescuemen (PJ). Nine PJs were awarded Air Force Crosses for Combat SAR missions in Vietnam...of those nine missions - two had Coast Guard Aviators as Aircraft Commanders - this is one.

On 01 July SCOTCH 3, LTCOL Jack Modica was flying an F-105D of the 333rd TFS and 355th TFW out of Takhli on a strike north of the DMZ and took part in an attack on SA-2 missiles on missile carriers en route to a SAM site near the DMZ. His F-105 Thunderchief was hit, but he thought he could stay airborne long enough to reach the gulf. This did not prove to be the case and he was forced to eject in extremely hostile country north of the DMZ, 17 miles west of Dong Hoi in North Vietnam.

A second pilot in the vicinity saw the chute and noted the approximate position as Modica disappeared into the North Vietnamese jungle. It was a low level ejection and when he hit the ground he was knocked unconscious. It was two hours later that he filled the overhead FAC in on his condition. The time delay had given the North Vietnamese time to get to his location. To compound matters, he reported that something had happened to his back and he couldn't move. [Excerpts from Mission Narrative Report (1-3-65, 01 July 68) and "The Jolly Greens – The Story of the Rescue of Scotch 3" Coast Guard Aviation History webpage]

The first Jolly Green to go in was driven away several times and had to leave because of low fuel. Coast Guard LCDR Lonnie Mixon (AC) was next to try in HH-3E JOLLY 29 with CPT Don W. Wiegand (CP); TSGT Jackie Lee Mangrum (FE) and SGT Donald J. Boushelle (PJ). The Sandys went in with suppression fire but Mixon soon learned it had little effect. The North Vietnamese hit him with ground fire and damaged a fuel tank, ruptured a hydraulic line, and knocked out part of the electrical system. He pulled off and the strike aircraft went back in. Darkness was falling but the rescuers decided to try one more time. Mixon told the on scene commander that his helicopter was still flyable and that he would go in and make the attempt. He started in and tracers lit the night as the helicopter was hit again and again. Mixon had to break it off. Modica, having hid himself the best he could, would spend the night on the ground. The next morning the Jollys tried again but it didn't go well. An A-1 was shot down, killing the pilot*** and a badly shot up HH-3E was returning to DaNang with a rocket lodged in the belly. It had penetrated a fuel cell but had failed to explode. Coast Guard LCDR Lonnie Mixon and his previous aircrew that was shot up badly the day prior flew another sortie in JOLLY 24. Rescue forces were recalled. Several hours later, after a B-52 bomber strike close to the scene, a decision was made to make another attempt.

HH-3E JOLLY 21 (#67-14708) was low bird and the crew, Coast Guard LT Lance Eagan (AC), MAJ Robert "Bob" E. Booth, (CP); SGT Herbert Honer (FE), and A1C Joel Talley (PJ), knew that it was going to be a rough one. They would have to penetrate a well-established "flak-trap" in order to make the pickup. Lance descended through very heavy 37mm anti-aircraft fire using twisting evasive maneuvers. He took several hits and the concussion from airbursts staggered the helicopter. Then he was through it and into the a box canyon peering for SCOTCH 3 through the triple canopy. Eagan made radio contact and could see the smoke the downed airman was sending up, but due to the extremely dense jungle, it was impossible to sight the man. Modica was unable to help himself which made it necessary to send the PJ down on the penetrator. Eagan spotted a small opening in the jungle near Modica's smoke, and Talley was lowered. Once on the ground Talley looked up at the flight engineer who pointed in the direction of Modica. The undergrowth was so dense it took him a good bit of time to find the man. It was determined Modica's pelvis was broken and that he must be moved as little as possible.

Talley used his radio to vector the helicopter to his position. Eagan found himself in a small valley with tall trees and three sides rising 200 feet above him. There was no hostile fire directed at the JOLLY 21 at this point in time but Eagan knew the North Vietnamese would zero in on the smoke. He had to get to Talley and Modica quickly and bring them up. With his height above the terrain limited by the length of the hoist cable, he edged ever closer to Talley's position. The rotor blades lopped off tops of the trees as he went, until he could get no closer to a towering dominant tree that the injured pilot lay against. The penetrator was dropped and Talley carried the pilot the short distance to it. He had been on the ground for 18 minutes. He strapped himself and the pilot in then pushed his radio switch.

Eagan heard Talley say "Take us up". The flight engineer started the hoist up and at that instant Eagan caught sight of movement in front of him. The whole world seemed to erupt. The enemy, waiting for the moment of vulnerability, sprang the trap. Intense automatic weapon fire came from below and in front of the helicopter. Hostile fire punctured the windshield spraying powdered glass all over him, but Eagan could not move until the PJ and rescued pilot cleared the tree tops. It seemed like an eternity then he heard a shout from the back that Modica and Talley were clear of the trees. Without hesitation he pulled away, with the PJ and injured pilot swaying below the aircraft. He turned the aircraft to shield them from the ground fire. Once everyone was on board, he went direct to the field hospital at Dong Ha.

Eagan and his crew checked their Jolly. The titanium armor plating and luck saved them. The intensity of the fire showed in their battle damage. They had taken direct hits from large caliber automatic weapons. A total of 40 bullet holes were counted in the fuselage; the tail section had a gaping hole; four of the five rotor blades had been hit; and the self-sealing fuel tank had nine punctures in it.

Eagan had missed being killed by a matter of inches and the copilot was saved by the titanium plating under his seat. The Jolly Green was deemed unflyable and was transported back to DaNang by a CH 54B Skycrane helicopter. The rescued pilot, LTCOL Jack Modica, was quoted as saying, "I've heard of the incredible jobs done by the rescue forces and now I'm convinced of it!" ROTORS RULE!!!

For this mission, A1C Talley earned the Air Force Cross while LCDR Mixon (01JUL68) and LT Eagan both earned the Silver Star. LCDR Mixon (02JUL68) and TSGT Mangrum earned the Distinguished Flying Cross - links to CITATIONS below.

NOTE: Jim Loomis (another Coast Guard Aviator that flew in Vietnam) sends: FYI- 1st Lt Dick Rutan, of non-stop flight around the world fame was flying one of the first aircraft on scene, a Misty FAC. He said it was the hairiest mission he faced in his year there. Mixon's bravery on Day One cannot be overlooked. I've known a lot of pilots who have aborted their peacetime missions for much less damage to their aircraft.

NOTE2: LTCOL Jack Modica (1924-2011) retired from the Air Force in 1970. His distinguished career included fighter-pilot duty in WWII (P-38), Korea (F-86) and Vietnam (F-105), and his combat awards included the Silver Star, Purple heart and Distinguished Flying Cross. In retirement he remained in touch with both Lance Eagan and Joel Talley...

NOTE3: *** = On July 2, 1968, Major Henry A. Tipping and Captain “Stretch” Ballmes were flying a SAR mission for a downed F-105 Thunderchief fighter bomber pilot in the DMZ. Major Tipping was designated Spad 11. Attempting to pinpoint the survivor location, Spad 11 made a low pass and received heavy enemy automatic weapons fire. Tipping pulled off and headed toward a safe area. Ballmes tried to talk to Spad 11, but received no response. The stricken aircraft trailed heavy black smoke and crashed a short distance from the target area without the canopy leaving the aircraft. The heavy enemy activity precluded a rescue attempt and Major Tipping was listed as Missing in Action.

NOTE4: During the SCOTCH 3. SAR effort, 42 F-4s were allocated to the mission, and 32 were used. Twelve F-105s were also used. Additionally, there were five Misty (F-100) FACs and one Covey (O-2) FAC used; two FACs were on-scene almost continuously. When the primary SAR aircraft, consisting of eight A-1s, four helicopters and two Crown aircraft are added, the total number of aircraft involved totals 74. During the nine-hour mission, 121 tons of ordnance were expended.

NOTE5: Joel Talley passed away a few months ago on April 6, 2022, and was buried at Barrancas National Cemetery on NAS Pensacola, Florida.

Learn more about Airman Joel E. Talley and his Air Force Cross here:

<https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/3474>