

PEDRO'S PERIL

Phil Kammann's a captain now, assigned to Richards-Gebaur AFB, Mo., and flying rescue and recovery support for the *Apollo* astronauts.

But Philip H. Kammann was a 26-year-old first lieutenant when he made his rescue attempt.

It began, as most rescues do, with a radio crackling to life. The radio was at Binh Thuy AB, RVN, in the alert quarters of Detachment 10, 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. The caller was a controller from the IV Corps Direct Air Support Center. Time: 1:10 a.m.

"We've got two critically wounded Army troopers in an area where the 'Hueys' can't get in to land. One's got a sucking chest wound and the other has shattered legs. We need a rescue chopper with a hoist to get 'em out."

The controller gave the exact location, which turned out to be near Chi Lang in a mountainous area adjacent to the Cambodian border.

Phil Kammann was out of bed and had his clothes on before the controller stopped talking. "That's a good 50 miles from here. Better take both aircraft," Kammann called back to the bunkroom. The other crew was already up. Eight men hustled out to the alert pad.

The HH-43F—"Pedro" to everyone in Southeast Asia—was waiting. Even while Kammann was cranking up the engine, copilot Capt. Jack D. Cusano was already on the radio getting exact directions to the scene. It was a dark, moonless night and Kammann flew instruments most of the way to the area.

An AC-47 "Spooky" gunship and an Army *Cobra* helicopter were waiting. They had not yet spotted the survivors.

While the second Pedro — the "high bird"—remained in a safe orbit above the mountains, Kammann moved in with his aircraft to try to spot the survivors by the light of Spooky's flares. By now he had made radio contact with the men on the ground and they told him they had no flares or signaling devices of their own. Nothing but a penlight.

"We knew they were somewhere on a real rugged hill. There were rockpiles all over the place, and caves, too, we later found out. They said they were trying to signal us with their penlight but we couldn't spot them. That area must have been burned because there were all sorts of glowing embers all over it. Made it that much harder to spot the survivors."

When Kammann was pretty sure he knew the area where the survivors were, he asked the *Cobra* helicopter gunship to go in low to see if he would attract any fire. "He got no fire, so we made a low go to see if anybody was going to shoot at us. We didn't draw any fire either, so we figured the area was sterile."

As Kammann swung the Pedro around, pararescueman TSgt. Dudley Peckinpaugh, standing in the right rear door, spotted several men on a big rock, holding their hands up. Peckinpaugh remembers what happened.

"I had these guys in sight, stand-

ing there on the rock, so I started directing the helicopter in. Lieutenant Kammann hadn't seen 'em yet. We got over their position and I swung the litter out the door. About that time, Lieutenant Kammann said, 'I still don't have 'em in sight.' And I said neither did I because suddenly they were gone. That's when they opened up on us. It was a trap."

The Pedro was only 50 feet above ground when the firing began. But the steep slope made it possible for Kammann to drop the nose and gain airspeed and altitude in a hurry. Above him, the high bird Pedro was moving in fast. The crew figured Kammann had gone down in the heavy burst of firing.

"We moved out of the area a little and called for some suppressive fire. The *Cobras* put a lot of fire in there and they never got a shot back at them. I guess those guys knew the *Cobras* were armed and we weren't."

By now the Pedro was running low on fuel so Kammann flew to Chi Lang, 15 miles away, to refuel. Returning to the area, he was told by the *Cobras* that the area was sterile. They had received no further firing. So Kammann came in for another approach, this time blacked out—without lights. As he went into a hover, heavy fire again erupted. Again the gunships strafed the area.

But by this time Peckinpugh had spotted the blinking penlight. The survivors were three-quarters of the way up a 2,000-foot rocky hill. With their position pin-pointed,

Kammann decided to risk another blackout approach. Again as he went into a hover, he drew heavy fire. There was nothing to do but pull out and wait for daylight. Kammann again flew to Chi Lang for fuel.

"We thought it was kind of strange that we were still getting fire out of that area. By the time we made our fourth or fifth approach, we had all sorts of firepower in the area. We even had a big AC-130 'Spectre' out there with his big cannons and searchlight. The Spooky pilot told me he could see exactly where the firing was coming from and that he was firing right on that area. What none of us knew was that these guys had deep caves in that mountain and they'd fire at us and then just run back into the caves. The gunships couldn't touch 'em."

At dawn, Kammann and his crew checked the Pedro for hits. They thought they had taken one during the night. That became extremely obvious when they found the hole. The shell had come up through the cabin, just inches from where flight engineer SSgt. Gordon L. Browning was standing. And it had gone up through the roof and into the engine mount. Had it had enough velocity to travel another inch or so into the engine, it would have brought the Pedro down.

By 6:45, Kammann's helicopter was back in the rescue area. He made contact with the survivors and learned that they had received no hostile fire for several hours. By this time an F-100 had worked the area

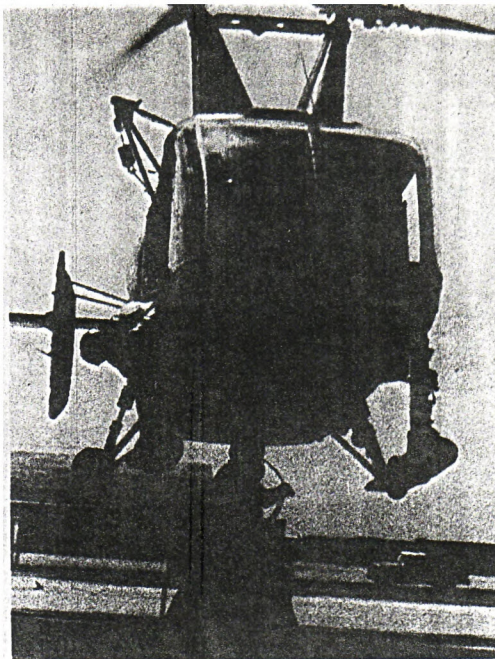
over. So had four *Cobra* gunships. A FAC was in the area, as well as "Crown," the rescue coordinating HC-130.

For his first daylight approach, Kammann selected an entry path along a ridge line. He drew fire even before he tried to hover. The FAC and the four gunships went to work. Another approach and more ground fire.

"By this time we had spotted a little helicopter landing pad just on the other side of the mountain, so we asked the survivors if they could get the wounded men up to it. They said they couldn't because the men were too badly hurt. I can't say I blame them for not wanting to move. There were all kinds of bad guys all over that place."

Copilot Jack Cusano, busy throughout this period with radio communication from everyone in the area, and doing the navigating besides, now called for fighter-bombers to hit the area. Two jets came in and made several bomb-dropping passes, all of them on target. The ground party again reported the area secure and Kammann made another approach. Again he drew fire.

"It was about 8:30 by then and I needed fuel. So I went back to Chi Lang while all those airplanes softened up the area for me. When I got back they again reported it sterile and I again drew fire. On my second approach after that refueling, Browning and Peckinpugh shouted that we were taking hits. I pulled out in a hurry, but the controls still felt okay, so I went around for the



Pedro is a versatile bird. Here an HH-43 with a fire suppression kit responds to an emergency call at Bien Hoa AB, Vietnam.

ninth try. I made the approach with no sweat but I had a hard time transitioning to the hover. Finally, I got it down there and Peckinpaugh got the Stokes litter out the door. And that's when the fun really started!"

What Kammann didn't know was that his Pedro had taken a hit in the stability control system and that's what was making the hover difficult. Peckinpaugh had indeed gotten the Stokes litter out the door and had it only a few feet above the survivors' heads. He tells what happened.

"Well, we were in the hover and the guys were right down there so I was trying to get the hoist down to them, all the time talking on the radio. But then I heard us take hits and I looked up and there was a guy... he had jumped up on a rock and he was firing right at us from maybe 50 yards away. That's when I yelled, 'Pull out! Pull out!' so loud."

The survivors, too, saw the heavy fire and called for Kammann to pull out. Kammann applied max power and started to get out of the area but the quick change of attitude and airspeed caused the Stokes litter to swing upward—toward the rotor blades!

Peckinpaugh saw the litter go by and, held only by his gunner's belt, dove for it. As he struggled with the cable and the litter he called to Browning, who dropped his M-16

and grabbed Peckinpaugh around the waist, preventing him from falling out of the helicopter. Together, the two wrestled the litter back into the Pedro.

Against the background of two near-disasters—the bullets and the Stokes litter—and with his control greatly reduced due to the hit in the stability system, Kammann decided to abandon any further attempts at the rescue.

"Then we got another call from the survivors. They said, 'Would you drop us that funny looking thing you had hanging outside the door?' They meant the Stokes litter, of course, but I knew if they were going to try to carry their wounded over the hill the semirigid stretchers would be much better, so I decided to make one more low go and drop the stretchers. I came in real low, 12 or 15 feet above their position, because I knew if we didn't drop those stretchers right on them, they'd slide on down the mountain. Peckinpaugh pushed the stretchers out and they fell right on target. I don't think we drew much fire on that go. They were obviously waiting for us to hover."

Kammann flew his crippled Pedro to Chi Lang and landed safely. Almost hesitatingly, his crew members began to check for holes. They found 'em. Ten of them, five in the wooden rotor blades alone. The aircraft was technically not flyable.

Meanwhile, the little ground party had put the two wounded men on the stretchers and somehow avoided the enemy all around them to make it over the hill to the helicopter pad where an Army Huey picked them up. The Huey brought the wounded men to the nearest medically trained man around, Sergeant Peckinpaugh. By then, the backup Pedro had arrived and the two crews switched aircraft and Kammann flew the "good" one back to Binh Thuy. Throughout the flight back to home base, Peckinpaugh and Browning worked on the seriously injured Army men. Their efforts probably saved the lives of the two. Both survived.

"We later learned that the Army had tried to take that hill the day before and had failed. They went back a few days later and captured it. The whole mountain was lined with deep caves. They walked several hours through one of them. And they were full of stuff: B-40 rockets, 75mm recoilless rifles, 72 and 80mm mortars and 30- and 50-caliber machine guns as well as lots of small arms and automatic weapons. They even found typewriters in there!"

Later, as he watched his crippled Pedro being brought back to Binh Thuy slung under a big *Chinook* helicopter, Kammann's comment was a typical understatement: "I guess you could say that was a pretty hairy seven hours."

Guess you could at that!



AIRMAN