

Young NCO Leaves Legacy of Courage

By Maj. Carroll Shershun

TOM POPE is a most uncommon man among uncommon men. Sergeant Pope is only 22 years old. He was one of just 68 men in Southeast Asia authorized to wear the maroon beret of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service's select corps of pararescuemen.

Until recently he served with the 40th ARRS, home of the "Jolly Green Giant" rescue helicopters, at Udorn RTAFB.

When he left for his new assignment at Wilford Hall Hospital, Lackland AFB, Tex., he vowed to return to Southeast Asia within two years.

His vow isn't uncommon among the men of air rescue. Many of the 68 PJs (pararescuemen) are on their second tour of duty in the war zone. But even among the men of air rescue, the sergeant from Midwest City, Okla., is uncommon.

In addition to the Purple Heart, he wears the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star and the Air Medal.

He is personally responsible for having saved the lives of four persons during his combat tour in Southeast Asia.

Tom Pope came to the war zone with the first of the HH-53 "Jolly Green Giant BUFF (Big Ugly Fat Fellow)" rescue helicopters in late 1967. He flew his first mission three days before Christmas. When his tour was due to end last December, he extended for another tour.

During his 13 months in SEA, he flew 142 combat missions and compiled more than 324 hours of combat flying.

Last January, Tom Pope flew his last mission.

It was 99 in the shade and "hotter 'n hell" for the downed pilot on the ground, even though the day's first light barely shone. He had been on the ground overnight, surrounded by enemy troops, and had taken

refuge some two-thirds of the way up a 100-foot tree.

While airbursts from anti-aircraft weapons framed them, the men of the Jolly Green—circled by a protective "daisy chain" of A-1 "Sandy" fighters of World War II vintage—came onto the scene, hovered, and made the pickup in less than five minutes time. Tracer fire from the left was drawing closer. Less than a mile from the recovery site, however, the enemy scored a direct hit on the BUFF.

Miraculously, only one person was injured. It was Tom Pope. He had taken a hit in his left leg, lost considerable blood and was in serious condition when hospitalized. Only the rapid action of his fellow crew members and the survivor himself prevented the PJ from becoming an even more grim statistic.

His left leg had to be amputated.

Several weeks later, before leaving on a Military Airlift Command C-141 medical evacuation flight, Tom Pope made a last flight on his favorite "bird" the BUFF.

While his fellow crew members stood solemnly by, fighting back the tears which welled up in their eyes, Tom Pope smiled, joked and did what he had done with other survivors in the past—cheered them up in a moment of concern.

"He was the most courageous man I ever met," said Col. Hollon H. Bridges, commander of the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Gp.

"I'll never forget the sight of Tom Pope as he stood there on the ramp, impeccably dressed in his combat fatigues, cheering us up. And we were the ones who had come to cheer him on. I have never attended a more inspiring occasion."

Before taking his leave, Sergeant Pope turned and, with his left elbow resting on the crutch arm, he raised his right hand high in the V-sign made famous by Winston Churchill.

"I'll be back in two years," is

what Tom Pope said the two V-shaped fingers raised high stood for.

For the others there, they stood for Victory. The most important victory of Sgt. Tom Pope's young life.

During the long days and nights following the amputation of his left leg, Tom Pope was an inspiration to fellow patients at the Udorn RTAB Hospital and to the men of air rescue.

In addition to his smiles, Tom's encouragement to others, Tom Pope left another legacy.

These are the words by which those of us who were privileged to know Sergeant Pope shall always remember him:

"I lie and wonder not why I am here, but where I shall go from here.

"Perhaps my dreams for the beautiful things in life are there; I feel them envelop me in peaceful serenity.

"And I know I shall be brave, not from past achievements but in my pursuit with determination for my future life of happiness and accomplishments.

"I pray I shall always have strength not to wallow in self-pity but to lend a helping hand along my way to my future.

"For in all of us there is strength where courage adds tenderness to the heart, and in me may my strength turn aside weakness in quest of courage in others.

"If I could only march again not in military cadency but as a leader of a proud people,

"Then part of my dreams for the beautiful things in life would be there.

"I dream of leading myself with the ideals of others in a parade exalting the reasons why I was there.

"And perhaps I shall turn and look behind to discover I march not alone but am followed by the multitude who seek the dreams of beautiful things to come.

"Because, after searching their hearts and past heritage, they will have joined my parade



Sgt. Tom Pope flew 142 combat missions during his 13 months in Southeast Asia as a PJ. While trying to rescue a downed pilot in January 1969, Pope took a shot in his left leg, and it had to be amputated. Before taking leave, Pope stood on the ramp at Udorn RTAFB to cheer the HH-53 and his fellow PJs on. Raising his right hand, he flashed the 'V' sign—but for two not victory: He would be back in two years.

"Then another part of my dreams for the beautiful things in life would be there.

"Even though part of me is gone, I would march with pride toward the peaceful serenity, but not against the ideals for which I marched before.

"Yes, deep within me I know my personal loss is far less than the needless loss of ideals others have negligently allowed to be taken from them.

"So I lie there without the limb that was lost doing what I believed in with knowledge and pride; for the dreams I know will come true, I would march again."

"IF ONLY I COULD MARCH AGAIN!"

MSgt Dee W. Nelson
PJ Class of 52

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He is personally responsible for having saved the lives of four persons during his combat tour in Southeast Asia.

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"He was the most courageous man I ever met," said Col. Holton H. Bridges, commander of the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Gp.

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18 JAN 69

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A1C Joel E. Talley in work gear for a rescue operation. Pararescueman has been awarded the Air Force Cross for his part in a pilot save last July (see "The Lifesavers: SEA's Air Rescuemen," by Maj. Carroll S. Shershun, AF/SD, June '69). Talley is only the seventh enlisted man to win the award.



Courage—and danger—are the prerequisites for air rescuemen in Vietnam. Sgt. Tom Pope, holder of the Purple Heart, DFC, Bronze Star, and the Air Medal, lost a leg during a rescue operation in January 1969. During his 142 combat missions, Sergeant Pope saved the lives of four men.



Another Air Force Cross recipient helicopter pilot Maj. Joe B. Greer has been credited with saving the lives of twenty-two men during recovery missions in SEA. The major's Air Force Cross, for "extraordinary heroism," is only the eighteenth award of USAF's second highest decoration.

1st Lt. Greer - pilot
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No photos



ON HIS FINAL VISIT to his former squadron, following the loss of his leg, Sgt. Tom Pope is greeted by Lt. Col. Chester Ratcliffe, commander of the 40th ARRS, Udorn RTAFB.



Chief Master Sergeant Charles D. King.

responded, snapping off the hoist cable. Airman King was declared missing in action (MIA) and was later promoted to chief master sergeant until 5 December 1978, when he was declared killed in action (KIA).

14 JAN
January 1969 -- HH-53 crews from the 40th ARR Squadron at Udorn Royal Thai AB scrambled to get airborne for a combat rescue mission to pick up a fighter pilot shot down the previous night over North Vietnam. Pararescueman Sergeant Tom Pope was the tail-gunner during the run-in for extraction. While airbursts from antiaircraft weapons encircled them, the men of the Jolly Green, covered by a protective "daisy chain" of A-1E "Sandy" fighters, came onto the scene. The Jolly Green settled into a hover and made the pickup in less than five minutes. Enemy tracer fire from the left began to draw in closer. As the HH-53 pulled away from the battle scene, the enemy gunners found their mark and scored a direct hit on Sergeant Pope's position. Although seriously damaged, the HH-53 managed to remain airborne. The pararescueman manning the left window gun saw Sergeant Pope dangling below the tail of the helicopter by his gunner's belt where the ramp used to be. He quickly pulled the unconscious Sergeant Pope into the helicopter and surveyed the damage. Sergeant Pope was bleeding profusely from where his left leg used to be and was in serious condition.

The rapid action and treatment by the other pararescueman prevented Sergeant Pope from becoming an even more grim statistic. Several weeks later, before leaving on a Military Airlift Command C-141 medical evacuation flight, Sergeant Pope,

Last flight for Sergeant Tom Pope (center), who lost his left leg from enemy gunfire on an HH-53 he was flying gunner for in January 1969. From left to right: Lieutenant Colonel Rataliff, Sergeant Pope, and Sergeant D.C. Johnson.



SERGEANT POPE'S SACRIFICE AND A PROMISE TO RETURN

SOUTHEAST ASIA — Tom Pope is a most uncommon man among uncommon men.

Sergeant Thomas R. Pope is only 22 years old.

He was one of only 68 men in Southeast Asia authorized to wear the distinctive maroon beret of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service's select corps of pararescuemen.

Until recently he served with the 40th ARRS, home of the "Jolly Green Giant" rescue helicopters, at Udorn Royal Thai Air Base.

When he left for his new assignment at Wilford Hall Hospital, Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Tex., he vowed to return to Southeast Asia within two years.

His vow isn't uncommon among the men of air rescue. Many of the 68 PJs (pararescuemen) in the war zone are on their second and third tours of duty here.

But even among the men of air rescue, the sergeant from Midwest City, Oklahoma, is uncommon.

In fact, not only was he one of 68 to wear the maroon beret, but he is one of only 74 men of the 3d Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Gp., the most decorated unit in the annals of aviation history, to be awarded the Purple Heart.

He also wears the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star and the Air Medal.

He is personally responsible for having saved the lives of four persons during his combat tour in Southeast Asia.

Sergeant Pope came to the war zone with the first of the HH-53 "Jolly Green Giant BUFF" (big ugly fat fellow) rescue helicopters in late 1967. He flew his first mission three days before Christmas. When his tour was due to end last December, he extended for another tour.

During his 13 months in SEA, Tom Pope flew a total of 142 combat missions and compiled more than 324 hours of combat flying in the fastest, biggest, highest-flying helicopter in the Air Force inventory.

In January 1969 Tom Pope flew his last mission.

It was a hot, duty day .. like most any other January day. It was 99 in the shade and "hotter'n hell" for the downed pilot on the ground, even though the day's first light barely shone. He had been on the ground overnight, surrounded by enemy troops, and had taken refuge some two-thirds of the way up a 100-foot tree.

While airbursts from anti-aircraft weapons framed them, the men of the Jolly Green - circled by a protective "daisy chain" of A-1 "Sandy" fighters of World War II vintage - came onto the scene hovered, and made the pickup in less than five minutes time. Tracer fire from the left was drawing closer. Less than a mile from the recovery site, however, the enemy scored a direct hit on the BUFF.

The events which followed, like many

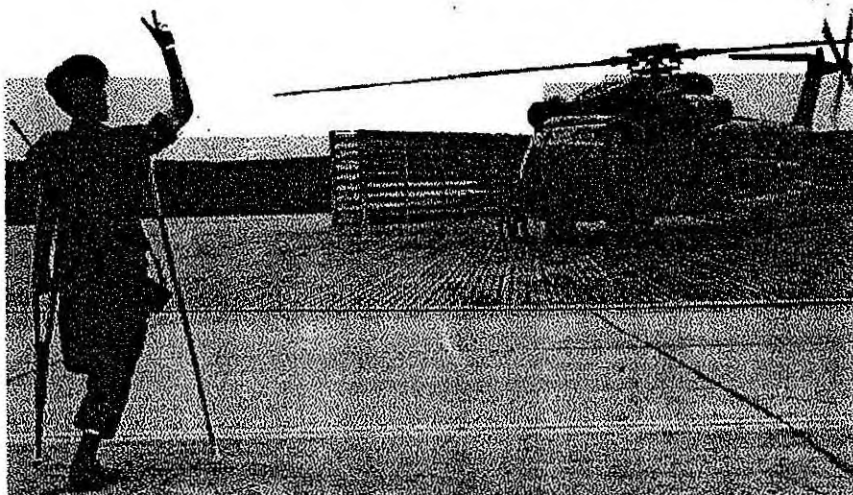
in rescue operations, would read like an adventure story.

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SERGEANT POPE GIVES THE "V" FOR VICTORY SIGN

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SGT. THOMAS R. POPE