

TSgt. Michael Fish—This is your life!

ELMENDORF AFB, Alaska -- What started out as a special TDY assignment for a pararescuer with the 71st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron here turned out to be much more of a surprise for the 25-year-old sergeant.

When he left for Los Angeles, TSgt. Michael Fish thought he was going to be a technical advisor on an air rescue training film. Instead, when he arrived at the studio to review some film clips, he found himself facing approximately 500 people and, half-dazed, hearing someone saying, "This is your life!"

That someone was Ralph Edwards, producer and master of ceremonies for the widely televised "This Is Your Life" program.

Mr. Edwards had initially submitted a request to the Department of Defense to honor someone from one of the four branches of service who had distinguished himself in the performance of his job -- rescue. Sergeant Fish was selected and Mr. Edwards found himself with not only a heroic, but a very personable subject for his show.

If you've ever wondered whether or not those people selected for the show knew in advance that they would be on the program, the answer is no. In fact, absolutely no as Sergeant Fish's wife, Chris, and his commander, Lt. Col. Ronald J. Soroka, can attest. All preparations for his appearance were made secretly.

"It was really nerve racking trying to keep it a secret," began Mrs. Fish. "I wasn't even supposed to tell my friends or relatives. That was a hard job, especially since I'm so proud of him."

Sergeant Fish said he was more shocked than anything else. "I realized immediately what was going on, but when you're standing there with 500 people staring at you, it takes a few minutes to clear up your mind."

The first part of the program was devoted to reuniting Fish with men whose lives he was responsible for saving -- some of whom had never had a chance to thank him -- and his partners and friends from the different squadrons he had been assigned to.

One of the highlights of the program was the story of how combat became a reality for him in Vietnam on the 18th and 19th of February, 1969.

He had volunteered for the mission. The location was a remote, mountainous, densely-jungled canyon. He was lowered from the rescue helicopter through intense ground fire to treat and rescue the crew of a downed helicopter.

He remained on the ground all night,

protecting and evacuating the men. The enemy was less than a hundred yards away.

CWO Victor Rose was one of the men whose lives Sergeant Fish had saved that night. He was commander of a helicopter sent out on a rescue mission. Suddenly, the engine went out and they crashed. When he woke up, Sergeant Fish was putting balloon splints on his legs, which were both broken.

Fish placed CWO Rose in a basket and, under enemy fire, dragged him through the trees to the helicopter.

CWO Frank Martin, co-pilot of the crashed chopper, was trapped in the wreckage. He drifted in and out of consciousness as Sergeant Fish worked to free his trapped leg.

The monsoon rains got so bad the choppers had to leave, but Sergeant Fish stayed with the trapped co-pilot.

He stayed with Mr. Martin for over 17 hours.

All the men in the operation were rescued on the 19th of February and Sergeant Fish had earned the Air Force Cross after just one month's service in Vietnam.

He was credited with 11 combat rescues at the greatest possible risk to his own life during his tour in Southeast Asia.

And so it went on. Listing rescue after rescue, life after life that the young technical sergeant is credited with saving.

"I was just in the right places at the right times," said the modest sergeant. But sources say otherwise.

They say that saving lives and heroic behavior under those circumstances are part of this man's physical makeup. Truly, here is a man believing in the Rescue Service motto "That others may live."

According to Mr. Edwards, the show honoring TSgt. Michael Fish earned -- for the second time in the program's history -- a standing ovation from the audience.

A fitting tribute to a job well done, Mike!



FAMILY AFFAIR - Mike's wife, Chris, and their two sons, Mike Jr., left, and Brian were flown to California by Ralph Edwards to participate in the program honoring the distinguished sergeant.