

SERGEANT'S BRAVERY HELPS SAVE PATROL, HELICOPTER CREWMEN

TAN SON NHUT AB, Vietnam—Heroic efforts to rescue an Army patrol and downed helicopter crew have earned Sgt. Michael E. Fish the nation's second highest award for bravery.

Sergeant Fish was presented the Air Force Cross by Air Force Secretary Robert C. Seamans, Jr. during the secretary's visit here.

Cited for voluntarily risking his life for more than 15 hours, Sergeant Fish saved an Army UH-1 helicopter crewmember and also helped rescue others pinned down by deadly enemy fire.

The helicopter crew was shot down Feb. 18, 1969, while attempting to rescue a small Army patrol from an area near a North Vietnamese Army camp in a canyon 28 miles west of Tuy Hoa AB.

The Army asked for help and Air Force rescuemen of the 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron's Det. 11 at Tuy Hoa answered the call. An aircrew from the detachment, including Sergeant Fish, flew into the hostile area in their HH-43 Pedro helicopter. They were accompanied by Army helicopter gunships to suppress enemy ground fire.

GUNSHIPS STRAFE AREA

Despite strafing by the gunships, heavy cross-fire from enemy automatic weapons entrenched in the mountainside opened up as the Pedro crew neared the crash site. Rescue attempts normally would be postponed until the enemy fire could be suppressed, but the condition of several of the survivors was described as "grave." The unarmed Pedro crew went in for the rescue.

As the rescue helicopter hovered a few feet above the thick jungle canopy, Sergeant Fish and another rescue specialist were lowered on a jungle penetrator through intense enemy fire.

Despite continuing enemy groundfire, three injured crewmembers were given emergency medical care and lifted to the hovering Pedro.

An Army UH-1 helicopter with a hoist then came to a hover over the crash site, and Sergeant Fish and others on the ground secured another patrol member to the hoist for evacuation.

Sergeant Fish found the pilot of the crashed helicopter seriously injured and pinned in the tangled wreckage. As Ser-

geant Fish worked to free him, the Army gunships had to leave the area to be refueled.

As the gunships departed, Sergeant Fish worked silently trying to free the pilots so as not to give away their position to the enemy. The pilot was given medical care and a sedative by Sergeant Fish.

More Army gunships arrived later and stilled four enemy soldiers stealing toward the crash site through a clearing about 100 yards from the survivors.

These gunships continued pounding the enemy positions as the patrol team fired at the enemy and Sergeant Fish tried to free the pilot. His efforts were hampered by a damaged metal saw, however and his hatchet and other hand tools were ineffective against the tangled wreckage.

HELICOPTERS LEAVE

At nightfall the helicopter crews had to give up their efforts, despite chances the enemy would attack the survivors during the night. Sergeant Fish and his assistant were instructed to leave the scene on a helicopter, but Sergeant Fish refused. Sergeant Fish told his assistant to inform the crew that he would remain at the site to give medical aid and try to free the pilot.

The young sergeant worked through the night caring for the pilot, who was intermittently in shock, and radioing instructions to flareships circling above.

"We heard enemy movement throughout the night, but they did not attack," one of the survivors reported later. "As it turned out, the enemy was setting up an ambush for the helicopters coming to help us in the morning," he said.

RESCUERS RETURN

As the enemy soldiers anticipated, the rescuers returned in the morning. The Pedro helicopter again hovered above the canopy, and another pararescue specialist and flight engineer with special rescue tools started down the penetrator.

With the rescuers suspended in midair and the Pedro hovering vulnerably, the enemy opened the heaviest cross-fire of the rescue attempt.

Army gunships fired back and the enemy weapons positions were silenced for a few minutes. This was long enough for Sergeant Fish and the others to free the pilot, and help hoist him to the waiting Pedro.

An Army UH-1 then hoisted Sergeant Fish and the remaining members of the ground party out of the area and flew them to safety.