

It was one of those days. After a dusty, hot Vietnam sunrise you fill in a square on the FIGMO chart—the one reminding you of the days until you go home—gripe a little over chow about the weather, or the sleepless night before or the general condition of duty in Nam.

It could have been like that all day on rescue alert at Da Nang, up-country in the Republic. Wait, shoot the bull, watch for the flag to go up over the mailroom.

That's how it *could* have been. But this day fortune, the fickle mistress of fate, wouldn't have it that way. For the crew of *Jolly Green 27*—sitting cocked and ready on the pad—this was to be the day of the test of fire.

Maj. Travis Wofford, copilot,

hadn't given much thought to the coming afternoon. He was still thinking about yesterday, when he and the crew of another Da Nang *Jolly Green* rescued five downed Army flyers. What news could another steaming day hold in store? Certainly he never even suspected that today he would win the Cheney Award for extraordinary efforts trying to save his friends from a burning, twisted hunk of metal. No, it never crossed his mind.

It was Wednesday, April 15, 1970 in the Republic. Slowly, the uneventful morning passed.

Early in the afternoon *Jolly 27* was scrambled. An Army chopper was down in the Central Highlands, the crew surrounded by Viet Cong. *Jolly 27* would be

the primary rescue craft—low bird. Another HH-3 would fly cover.

CHURNING THE SOUPY AIR

On the way to the scene, as the rotors churned the soupy air, the crew watched the paddies pass below, symmetrical and green. They watched the farmers in their big straw hats planting rice—the water buffalo plodding through the shallow water. They saw the ugly blister of a fire-base rising swollen from one of the brilliant green fields.

Forty-five minutes after scramble, the big jungle-painted *Jolly* arrived on the scene. The Army chopper had gone down on the side of a hill. The A-1s—*Spads*, as they're called

Fighting the flames consuming their flightsuits,
he helped to pull them from the burning *Jolly Green 27*.
For Maj. Travis Wofford it had been a date with the . . .

Mistress of Fate

by Sgt. DAVE COLE

"We took a few hits on the

on rescue runs—were already softening up the area. *Jolly 27's* crew could hear the rockets pop and see the dirty brown clouds rise after the explosions.

They watched as the little prop-driven *Spads* buzzed just above the trees like angry hornets, raking the ground with fire, trying to clear the area, or at least keep the VC heads down so the rescue birds could do their job.

After a briefing by the on-scene commander, *Jolly Green 27* prepared for its first pick-up attempt. "We came in along the smoke pattern laid down by the *Spads*, but the wind had blown the smoke across the landing area and we had to pull off," Major Wofford recalls. "We took a few hits on that first run."

They pulled away and checked for damage. "Everything seemed alright, so we went down for the second pass."

Again the aircraft thumped over the rescue point. Again, the crackling small arms found their mark. One round penetrated the cockpit windshield. "I got a few glass fragments from it," the major remembers, "but nothing serious." Another check for damage, and *Jolly Green 27* tried again.

"We started in on the third run and got heavy fire from the right side," explains Major Wofford. With the help of the circling *Spads* and their own gunner, *Jolly 27* got into a hover. That's when it happened.

"A bunker of VC we didn't even know where there all of a sudden opened fire."

It was a typical VC trick. While the *Spads* had been working over the area, the bunker had held its fire—waiting. At just the right moment, when the big rescue craft pulled into a hover, they opened up with all they had to chop the aircraft from the sky. It worked.

"They pumped heavy automatic weapons fire into us from about 30 yards out. We took hits in the engine-transmission area and lost our auxiliary hydraulics and the number two engine. We got out of a hover, away from the smoke and off the hilltop."

YOU'RE ON FIRE!

Then one of the cover *Spads* called a warning. "*Jolly*, you're on fire, better get it down!"

"We looked back and saw fire and smoke in the rear of the aircraft. We picked a landing zone and tried to set her down."

Because of the loss of hydraulics and the engine, the pilots lost control. *Jolly Green 27* rocked and twisted violently, rolling past 90 degrees both left and right. Major Wofford and the aircraft commander Capt. Travis Smith fought to regain control and stabilize the now-dying ship.

Using "superb airmanship, the pilots righted the aircraft," the citation accompanying the Cheney Award explains.

Stabilized, but unable to main-

flight, the *Jolly* fell into a flat right hand spin and crashed into the jungle. It landed right side up but instantly burst into flames.

Captain Smith was pinned in the wreckage. "I reached out to him and tried to get him out," Major Wofford related. "I undid his seat belt, noting he had been knocked across the console. He showed no signs of life."

Looking back into the cargo compartment, Major Wofford saw a sheet of flames crackling through the interior of *Jolly 27*. He saw the other crewmen struggling to get out of the

MSgt. Harry A. Chapman was presented the first Cheney Award in 1928. He won it for slashing through the flaming fabric of the semidirigible *Roma* and helping four companions to safety. Eleven other men have won the award for acts of heroism involving flaming aircraft. Travis Wofford is one of them.

Maj. Travis Wofford was born in Los Angeles, Calif., and graduated from the University of Arizona in 1956. He entered the Air Force in 1957 and graduated from pilot training the next year. He spent 11 years flying SAC KC-97s and 135s and transferred to helicopters in 1969. He is the 37th airman to receive the Cheney Award, and earned his while he was serving with the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq. at Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam. Now an instructor pilot with the 1550th Aircrew Training and Test Wg. at Hill AFB, Utah, Major Wofford wears

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flames, their flightsuits on fire.

Jumping from the cockpit, he moved around the aircraft and began helping the others away from the flames.

He recalls virtually every detail of the next harrowing minutes as he struggled to save the members of his crew.

"When I looked back and saw the cargo area in flames, the PJ and flight engineer on fire, but standing up and moving, I jumped out of the cockpit and went to the side of the airplane to help them out. They were at the cargo door.

the Air Force Cross, the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters, the Air Force Commendation Medal and the Purple Heart.

Each year the Cheney Award is given in recognition of an "act of valor extreme fortitude or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest performed in connection with an aircraft."

The award is a memorial to 1st Lt. William A. Cheney, the first American casualty in Italy during the First World War. The award was established in 1927 as a memorial to the young airman by Mrs. Ruth Cheney Streeter and Mrs. Mary C. Schofield, his sister and mother. The proceeds of the lieutenant's government insurance policy form the nucleus of a trust fund which provides the award and cash honorarium. Each year a medal—individually cast—depicting an aviator riding winged winds is given to the winner.

"I dragged Sergeant Davis away from the airplane and put out the flames on his body. Then, I went back for Sergeant Hartzel who was now lying on the ground near the door. I put out the fire on his body and tried to drag him away. About this time Sergeant Davis came back over to me, trying to help. But, he had caught fire again, and once more I put the flames out and pulled him away from the airplane. The ammunition was cooking off all around us at that time. I didn't know if it was ours, or the enemy firing at us.

Finally I got us all away from the airplane so we wouldn't have to worry about it blowing up and getting us all."

INTO A HOVER

Seconds later Major Wofford looked up and saw the cover *Jolly* coming into a hover.

"The PJ was already on his way down when I looked up. My God, I thought, there is help. I didn't even need to contact them by radio. They were right there on top of us."

The pararescueman from the other helicopter, Sgt. Gary T. Osborne, and the major loaded the wounded crewmen onto the penetrator. Seconds later they were all hoisted to the relative safety of the cover *Jolly*.

Despite the extraordinary efforts of Major Wofford, TSgt. Gerald L. Hartzel, the flight engineer and SSgt. Luther E. Davis, the pararescueman, later

died from their burns.

"The hardest part of the entire episode," the major admits today, "was to find out later that the other crewmen had died. That was harder than anything else to accept. If only they had lived it would have all been worthwhile."

Maj. Travis Wofford, the lone survivor of *Jolly Green 27*, won the Cheney Award for 1971 for his valiant rescue efforts that day.

The citation which accompanies the award put it like this:

Maj. Travis Wofford displayed extreme fortitude and valor in military operations against an opposing armed force as Rescue Helicopter Copilot near Dak Nay Puey, Republic of Vietnam, on 15 April 1970. On that date, while attempting to rescue the crew of a United States Army helicopter, Major Wofford was wounded, but chose to continue with the rescue attempt until his own helicopter was shot down. After the crash, Major Wofford, with complete disregard for his own personal safety, attempted to free the mortally wounded pilot, then put out the flames on the other crewmembers and dragged them clear of the flaming wreckage to a position from which they were rescued.

Poor is the country that has no heroes, but beggared is that people who, having them, forgets.

—Unknown