

AIRMAN

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE U.S. AIR FORCE

Volume XVII, Number 8

August 1973

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Air Force mechanics are trained well. See
TUNE 'EM UP AND HEAD 'EM OUT, page 16

FRONT COVER: Photo by Ron Hall
BACK COVER: Photo by SSgt. Bill Ford

AIRMAN is published monthly by Internal Information Division, Directorate of Information, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force. As the official magazine of the U.S. Air Force, it is a medium of information for Air Force personnel. Readers are encouraged to submit articles, photographs and artwork. All contributions will be considered. Suggestions, criticisms are also welcomed. Opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect the official viewpoint of the U.S. Air Force. Editorial Offices: AIRMAN Magazine, Stop B-15, Bolling AFB, D.C. 20332. Telephone: Area Code 202, 574-4100. AUTOVON: 991-4100. AIRMAN annual subscription prices are: \$12.50 domestic, \$15.75 foreign, or \$1.25 a copy. Mail check or money order to: Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Back issues are not available. USAF RECURRING PUBLICATION 30-15. All photographs are official USAF photos unless otherwise designated.



At first they called it "Mission Impossible."
But after they pulled it off—much to everyone's surprise—
they renamed it the . . .

Miracle Mission

by TED R. STURM

You wouldn't think a bunch of guys would be relieved when they got the word to start a run into a death trap, would you?

But they were. As anyone who has been in combat knows, the anticipation can sometimes be worse than the battle itself.

That's why the call from the survivors in Quang Tri's Citadel was so welcome. It fulfilled the vocally expressed desire of more than one member of the *Jolly Green* rescue force to "get the damn show on the road." After an hour of orbiting, they were anxious.

"We're standing by to receive the helos," the men on the ground radioed, and Maj. Jackson R. Scott, commander of the first *Jolly Green* scheduled to land, immediately announced that he was starting in.

"Stay away from the stream beds," came a radioed warning.

"Roger that," Scott replied. "Where can we expect the most ground fire?"

"Mainly from the two o'clock position at first," his guiding Forward Air Controller answered, "but after you're over the city, it will come from all over."

"Ah, roger," Scott said as he swung the big bird toward what had to be the hottest target area in Vietnam that day. Behind him, three more *Super Jolly Green Giants*, the big HH-53s of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq. at Da Nang AB, awaited their turns.

For most of the 20 *Jolly Green* crewmembers in the four HH-53s that particular Monday, May 1, 1972, it was a rescue mission the likes of which had never before been tried in Southeast Asia. And since then, it has been acclaimed as the largest aerial evacuation of the Vietnam War—truly a miraculous mission.

Certainly the situation into which the rescuemen were flying at Quang Tri gave little cause for optimism. In fact, it had all the earmarks of a disaster waiting to happen.

Caught in the onslaught of the North Vietnamese offensive that had begun March 30 with a drive across the DMZ, Quang Tri was now surrounded by four North Vietnam Army (NVA) divisions. The enemy had cut Highway 1, the only escape route south to safety, and had been pound-

ing Quang Tri with artillery, mortars, and rockets for several weeks.

Grouped in the Citadel, a walled military compound in the middle of Quang Tri proper, were 80 American advisors, and several members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). There was only one way out—by helicopter.

And there was precious little time left.

What made the situation potentially disastrous for the *Jolly Green Giants* was the fact that the landing zone was small. Located inside the Citadel, it was large enough for only one helicopter at a time. And like everything else of military significance in Quang Tri, the LZ had been zeroed in by enemy artillery for several days. Add to that the fact that any approach to the Citadel was over several miles of NV-held territory, and you get some idea of why people were a bit edgy.

"If we sent the birds in low, they would be subject to intense ground fire, including the hand-held Strella—now called the Quail—that heat-seeking missile," said Col. William M. Harris, IV, then a lieutenant colonel and commander of the 37th ARRS. "On the other hand, if we sent them in high, they would be fair game for the SAMs. There simply was no 'safe' altitude for the *Jolly Greens*."

According to the evacuation plan, three helicopters, with two on airborne standby, would be needed to get the people out of Quang Tri.

"Initially, we planned for 120 people. Each of the three *Jollys*, 3 to 5 minutes apart, was to pick up 40. As it turned out, we evacuated 132!"

The number of people to be rescued wasn't the only thing that changed during the operation. The situation on the ground was extremely fluid, and the enemy was beginning to move into and past Quang Tri faster than expected. Therefore, not only was there far less time left than many had hoped for, but the need to keep air strikes in and around the city meant the helicopters couldn't move into Quang Tri as early in the afternoon as the planners had hoped. That's why people were getting anxious to get the show on the road.

Orbiting over the coastline, east of Quang Tri, the helicopter crews tried

to keep abreast of everything happening on the ground and in the air.

While they waited, the *Jolly Green* crews used the time to recheck everything. Guns were checked and rechecked, armor adjusted and fuel and power computations gone over. Aboard Major Scott's aircraft was an Army helicopter pilot who had been into the Citadel many times. He would serve as a guide to the LZ for the lead *Jolly Green*. Scott's copilot, Capt. David E. Mullenix, spent much of the waiting time explaining the *Jolly Green's* characteristics to the Army lieutenant, who flew the smaller Army *Cobra* and *Huey*.

Voices crackled continuously over the radio.

"I'm going to put a smoke rocket on the beach where I want you to enter." It was *Sandy Seven*, the A-1E leader whose support flight would pave the way for the *Jollys*.

"Roger," Scott acknowledged. "Are you in touch with *Bilk*?" *Bilk* was the FAC guiding the whole operation.

"Roger, *Jolly Seven One*," *Sandy Seven* answered. "He's directing some fast movers on a strike." Fast movers were the F-4 *Phantoms* working the area around Quang Tri.

"O.K.," Scott said. "I can't contact him. Ask him if there is some kind of delay we don't know about, or if we can go ahead in."

In a few minutes *Sandy Seven* answered. He told the rescue force that there were enemy tanks in the area, and that things were kind of mixed up on the ground.

"They're trying to straighten it out now," *Sandy Seven* said. "*Bilk* wants you to stand by."

Captain Mullenix, who had interrupted his rundown on the HH-53 long enough to listen, said to Scott over the intercome:

"So they got tanks in there they didn't know about, eh? I don't think we ought to rush into anything. Let them take all the time they need to get things ready."

Scott nodded his agreement, and checked with his engineer, Sgt. Ronald Blackwell. "How about refiguring to find out how much power we'll need to hover in ground effect with 4,500 pounds of fuel?"

"Roger, sir," Blackwell answered,

"stand by one." In a few minutes he had the answer. "You'll need 95 percent, Major."

"Thanks, Sergeant Blackwell," Major Scott answered.

The radio crackled again. "SAM! SAM! Vicinity of DMZ—everybody keep your heads up!"

The voice was unknown, but it didn't matter. The threat wasn't close enough to worry the *Jolly Greens* anyway.

That's when the call came in to start the run. In the back, the two PJs, SSgt. Robert L. LaPointe and Sgt. David Young made sure their mini-guns were ready.

The *Sandys* had done their job well, strafing and bombing enemy positions, but there were so many enemy troops below, the *Jolly Greens* would still have to weave through a corridor of ground fire from tanks and antiaircraft guns. Then, on the ground even for a few minutes, they would be extremely vulnerable.

As Major Scott brought the big helicopter closer to the Citadel, the crew eliminated all but the absolutely necessary talk.

"We're starting the run-in," Scott told *Bilk*. "OK, Babes," the FAC came back.

"Lieutenant, where's that LZ?"

"Just west of that smoke, Major. See that yellow smoke in the middle, there? Just west of it," the Army man replied.

"Engineer, start the APP."

"It's on, sir, it's on!" Blackwell came back. The APP is the Auxiliary Power Plant.

"All set in the back, Major. No ground fire yet." It was LaPointe's voice.

"Watch those houses over there! OK, OK, you're looking good, Scotty!"

"SAM threat, Western DMZ!"

"Diamond Six, *Bilk* Control, Diamond Six, *Bilk* Control."

"Clear the primary, Diamond, clear the primary!"

Nobody in the helicopters paid any attention to the constant radio chatter. All eyes were on the LZ and the crowd of people waiting for the *Jolly Green*, now only a few yards away.

Artillery and rocket shells were exploding all over Quang Tri, and as Scott's aircraft drew nearer the LZ,

machine gun fire could be heard, even above the engine's roar. The NVA was shooting blindly, however, since a heavy smoke screen blanketed three sides of the LZ.

"OK, we're down," somebody said. "Let's get those people on!"

As Sergeant LaPointe got ready to leave, he noticed two snipers shooting at the *Jolly Green* from outside the LZ. LaPointe leaped to his minigun and made short work of the enemy soldiers. Then he got to the loading chore, counting as the Army men boarded the chopper.

"... 35, 36, 37, that's it, that's it!" he said over the intercom. "Take 'er up!"

"*Jolly Green* Seven One," Major Scott informed the FAC. "We're on the way out."

The heavily laden *Jolly Green* laboriously fought for altitude, narrowly missing a tall pole as it pulled up and over the wall of the Citadel.

"Everything OK in the back, LaPointe?" asked Major Scott as he nursed the bird into the air.

There was no reply.

"La Pointe?"

Still no answer.

"Are you on, LaPointe?" Scott asked again, urgently.

"I don't think LaPointe made it," somebody answered.

"Who told me to go? Who told me to take off?" Major Scott was truly concerned by now.

"LaPointe did, sir," Sergeant Young answered.

"He'll come out on the next chopper," Mullenix said. "I wonder what happened?"

Slowly, as the *Jolly Green* lifted clear, Scott reported that they were at 1,500 feet, and climbing 1,000 feet a minute.

"Great work, Scotty," a voice said.

"We're not out yet," he replied.

"Lordy, look at the tanks down there!"

Blackwell at that point noted that as far as he could determine, the *Jolly Green* had taken no hits. Nobody could believe it. As they moved out, they saw the second *Jolly Green* heading in for the LZ.

"There goes Rod," said Captain Mullenix.

Capt. Rodney S. Griffith and his

crew in the second *Jolly* got by with only sporadic small arms fire as they hopped and swerved their way into the besieged city.

They repeated Scott's performance, only this time they picked up 45 people instead of the expected 30. They also got Sergeant LaPointe, who was only too happy to climb aboard Griffith's *Jolly Green*. Later he explained that he fell off his helicopter as he was trying to keep more people from boarding—just as he gave Major Scott the word to go.

Now Griffith got the signal to lift off and he reacted immediately. As he lifted the aircraft to clear the roof of the buildings between them and the wall of the Citadel, he noticed that his rotor speed was at 92 percent—a bit low.

His copilot, Maj. Anthony A. Gates, started jettisoning fuel as Griffith moved forward to gain translational lift.

He crossed the wall descending, trying to milk up the rotor speed.

Once clear of the city, Griffith's *Jolly* just skimmed the rice paddies as he kept trying to get enough speed to climb. An enemy tank, sitting on the first large dike southeast of the city, caused Griffith to shudder.

"We've made it this far," he thought, "and now it's going to be all over!"

As they crossed over the tank at about 50 feet, they saw that it had already had been hit and was just a burned out shell!

Half way back to the beach they got up to 3,500 feet, and for the first time Griffith figured they just might make it.

The miracle mission was now half over. In the third *Jolly Green*, Capt. John R. Weimer and his crew got ready to take their turn at bat. Following basically the same pattern, he jockeyed his bird onto the smoking LZ, and loaded 50 people. They picked up some light fire as they lifted off, and as they moved out over the wall, they could see enemy ground troops making their way toward the landing zone.

By all rights, that should have ended the rescue, since Weimer was convinced he had brought out the last of the evacuees. But Capt. Donald A. Sutton, commanding *Jolly* number

four, picked up a radio message from the Citadel.

"Hey," the voice said, "we've got more people down here!"

Sutton set his *Jolly* on the spot as his PJs got ready to pick up the survivors, who were supposed to run up the ramp in the back of the aircraft as soon as it landed. When nobody showed for almost a full minute, Sgt. William J. Thompson stuck his head out the back to have a look. He saw no survivors, but he did see an enemy soldier who immediately began to walk a stream of automatic AK-47 fire toward Thompson and the helicopter. With lightning speed, the PJ leaped to his minigun. A short burst stopped the soldier in his tracks. Additional sniper fire was silenced by the other PJ, Sgt. Daniel G. Manion, who was also firing away with his minigun.

Meanwhile, the pilot had gotten radio confirmation from the air that there were no more survivors, and he immediately decided he and his *Jolly Green* crew could find a much better place to while away the time. Sutton poured on the power and his chopper lifted up and away.

They got no survivors, but they did gain the distinction of being the last Americans in Quang Tri.

What of the radio call that had brought them in? A trap. It was the enemy, pulling the helicopter in for what they must have figured was a sure kill. But they didn't reckon with either Captain Sutton or his fast-shooting PJs!

By 1850 hours, the operation was over. Everybody was safe at Da Nang.

But the most incredible part of the story was just being realized. *Not one crewmember or evacuee sustained any injury whatsoever! Moreover, there was not one bit of battle damage to any helicopter! Not even a single bullet hole!*

And while one *Sandys* supporting the rescue was downed, as was a FAC aircraft, both pilots were saved. The FAC pilot bailed out and was rescued by friendly ground forces. The fighter pilot ditched his A-1E in the ocean and was picked up by an Army helicopter.

"I can only say the Lord was with us all that day," Colonel Harris said later. He was also effusive in his praise of the team effort represented by the

Quang Tri rescue.

"Without the support of the FACs, the F-4s, the *Sandys* and the Navy, we couldn't have pulled this one off at all. But I also hope everyone will remember the team members who didn't make the headlines," he said.

He was referring to the *Jolly Green* maintenance men and all the support people who get plenty of work, but little glory.

"When we had only a few short hours to prepare for this mission," he pointed out, "these guys worked



through the night getting our birds ready to fly. I sure hope everyone remembers them!"

The men who flew those *Jolly Greens* into the jaws of death and out again that day still marvel that they are all alive.

As one man said, "Quang Tri was kind of like deliberately putting your foot into a bear trap and waiting for the snap that didn't come.

"Or sitting in a bunker and watching a bomb land a foot away, then discovering it's a dud. You feel like you have only seconds to live."

Not that Quang Tri was an unsprung trap or a dud—only that for some unknown reason it neither snapped nor blew up when by all conceivable odds it should have done both. Within minutes after the last *Jolly Green* pulled out of the Citadel, it and Quang Tri proper was overrun by the enemy.

That's pretty close.

Even for a miracle mission. 

The 37th ARRS' Finest Hour by John Weimer

My first tour flying the HH-53C Super Stallion with the 37th ARRS (the Jolly Green Giants) in DaNang was from October 1970 to October 1971. I flew from England and around Western Europe for about five months when I received orders to return to DaNang for a 90-day TDY tour. I arrived back in DaNang for my second tour with the 37th ARRS in mid-April 1972. This was during the famous Easter Offense when the NVA crossed south of the DMZ in force with tanks, AAA, missiles, etc. When I was not scheduled to fly the next day, I would usually stay up late reading, shooting the breeze with the troops, or writing letters to my wife. I distinctly remember not being in bed on the early morning of May 1st because I was not on the flying or alert schedule for that day. About 4 a.m. my friend Major Tony Gates knocked on my bunk room door and advised me to get dressed because we had a mission briefing. It didn't matter that I had not been to sleep that whole day as I was being transported with numerous other crewmembers to the briefing. An Army Colonel informed us that the Quang Tri Citadel was surrounded by the enemy and he didn't expect the garrison resistance in the compound to last much longer. We were told that there was a combination of about 150 U.S advisors and South Vietnamese troops in the Citadel. Apparently neither the Army nor the Marines had the helicopter resources to rescue that many people and since the Jolly Greens were in the rescue business, they gave us the mission. The plan was for us to launch four helicopters at first light and fly up the coast feet wet to a point abeam of Quang Tri. Once the supporting Sandys, fast movers, and the US Navy forces finished blasting something of a 'safe corridor' between the South China Sea and the Citadel we would go in one bird at a time, lift them out and take them to DaNang. We launched at first light and arrived at our holding position pretty much as planned with an altitude separation of 500 feet between helicopters. Time passed. More time passed. After boring holes in the sky for about five hours, we completed our first air refueling with the C-130's. Then we completed our second air refueling. More time passed. I remember radioing the lead helicopter crew that someone better make the call to go in because it was about to get dark. Naturally we could monitor the conversations between the FAC's, the Sandys, and all the other participating forces. With a whole lot of both nervousness and excitement, the first helicopter was finally cleared to go in. We had three code words; one for going in, one for landing, and one for the extraction. We listened as first Scotty (Maj. Jackson K. Scott) and then Rod (Capt. Rodney S. Griffith) called out the code words. Then it was our turn. As the number three aircraft we were well aware that the bad guys knew exactly where we were coming from and what our route would be. We also knew that the sixty or so defending forces extracted by the first two Jollys had significantly reduced the amount of defensive fire the Citadel could provide. My copilot (Capt. Gary A. Dake) called the code word, we landed and the rear doors flew open. I remember very vividly seeing bad guys firing at us as they climbed over the walls. As the troops boarded the guys in back returned fire with our .76mm Gatlin guns. Finally, the PJ's called out that all were on board and closed the doors. As we lifted off the helicopter started an uncontrollable turn to the right. I knew then that we had an extremely heavy load. As I added more power I saw the engine torque meters exceed 110% and decided not to look at them anymore as there were more important things at hand. Standing on the left rudder didn't help much so I elected to go with the flow. As we turned and lifted I saw shooting coming at us, explosions, fires burning and the Citadel wall in front of us. Thank God we made it over the wall. Doing so, I dropped the helicopter lower to pick up forward speed and translational lift. My copilot called that we had picked up the last of the troops and that we were on our way out. Just then a voice from an unknown source transmitted, "No, there are still some troops here." I remember listening in horror as the events surrounding our number four aircraft crew unfolded. They were somehow tricked and as they landed they alone faced a fearful enemy and loads of residence. They were extremely fortunate to get out of there in one piece. On the way back to DaNang one of the PJ's called out that there were 56 fully equipped combat troops rescued and all five Jolly crew members were uninjured. My thankful gratitude goes to my crewmembers: Copilot Captain Gary A. Drake; Flight Engineer SSgt. William A. Simm; PJ's Sgt. Richard L. Steed and A1C Michael A. Aillet. As it was that I had no sleep for over 40-hours the day and night before and was pumped up all day of the rescue, I was exhausted. Upon landing I stayed only a short while to take part in the happy reunion of the crewmembers, survivors, and the rest of the squadron members. I soon left the celebration, took the nearest crew truck, drove back to the barracks and went directly to sleep. Later I and others on this rescue mission were awarded a Silver Star. Looking back on my 15 months of flying for the 37th ARRS, I believe this mission was "our" finest hour. I am honored to have been a member of the team who pulled off this rescue. Flying rescue missions has been

the most gratifying experience in my lifetime. To be sitting in the pilots seat and turning back to see the smile on the face of someone's dad, someone's brother, someone's uncle, someone's husband, or someone's friend who is being pulled safely into the helicopter and has just had their life saved cannot be equaled. I thank God for keeping me safe. This information was provided by Lieutenant Colonel John R. Weimer (Retired) March 2005. John's mailing address is PO Box 97, Bailey, CO 80421

Editor's Notes: Rick Beaver brought John to the January 2005 chapter meeting. For a brief history of these events mentioned in John's story refer to the Easter Invasion chapter in the "South Vietnam on Trial" volume of The Vietnam Experience series from the Boston Publishing Company. Page 147 specifically mentions this rescue mission. John also provided a copy of "Miracle Mission" by Ted R. Sturm that appeared in the August 1973 issue of the Airman magazine.



The photo on the left came from 'The World's Great Military Helicopters' by Gallery Books published in 1990. The photo caption reads: 'In addition to fitted main and auxiliary fuel tanks, the CH-53 can acquire additional fuel via the forward-extendable inflight-refueling probe, and also via a hose attachment with the CH-53 hovering above.' The USAF HH-53C was dedicated to the task of combat search and rescue, being armed with three mini-guns and armored in critical areas.

The Veterans Bar submitted by Ed Fickes

Four retired vets are walking down the street window shopping. They turn a corner and see a sign that says "Veterans Bar" over the doorway of an entry into an establishment that doesn't look all that well kept up. They look at each other then go in.

On the inside, they realize in this case, they could judge the 'book by it's cover'. The old bartender says in a voice that carries across the room, "Come on in and let me pour one for you! What'll it be, gentlemen?"

There seems to be a fully stocked bar so the men all ask for a martini. In short time the bartender serves up four iced martinis - shaken not stirred and says, "That'll be 40 cents for the round, please."

The four men stare at the bartender for a moment then look at each other - they can't believe their good luck. They pay the 40 cents, finish their martinis and order another round. Again, four excellent martinis are produced with the bartender again saying, "That's 40 more cents, please." They pay the 40 cents but their curiosity is more than they can stand. They've each had two martinis and so far they've spent less than a dollar. Finally one of the men says, "How can you afford to serve martinis as good as these for a dime a piece?" The bartender replies, "No doubt you've noticed the decor in here. And the outside ain't nothin' to write home about. I don't waste money on that stuff. But, here's my story. I'm a retired Marine Master Sergeant and I always wanted to own a bar. Last year I hit the lottery for \$45 million and decided to open this place for real veterans. Every drink costs a dime, wine, liquor, beer, all the same." "Wow, that's quite a story," says one of the men.

The four of them sipped at their martinis and couldn't help but notice three other guys at the end of the bar who didn't have a drink in front of them and hadn't ordered anything the whole time they were there. One man finished his martini and, gesturing at the three at the end of the bar without drinks, asks the bartender, "What's with them?" The bartender says, "Oh, those are retired Army Colonels, they're waiting for happy hour. Drinks are half price then."