



A watercolor illustration in a warm, yellowish-brown palette. In the upper half, a military helicopter is shown from a low angle, appearing to hover or land. Its rotors are blurred, suggesting motion. Below the helicopter, in the lower half of the frame, several soldiers in combat uniforms and helmets are visible. They are looking up towards the helicopter. The background is a hazy, textured wash of colors, suggesting a battlefield or a cloudy sky.

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 Stella—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 Giant*, 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.