

Air Force HH-53s carry out largest evacuation of the war

TAN SON NHUT AB, Republic of Vietnam (7AF) — Five U.S. Air Force HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant helicopters performed the largest evacuation of the Southeast Asian conflict on Monday evening May 1, when they airlifted 132 Americans and Vietnamese out of Quang Tri.

Three of the HH-53s, of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Da Nang Airfield, were responsible for carrying out the evacuees. A fourth helicopter landed to make sure all persons were evacuated and a fifth stood by in case it was needed.

The 132 evacuees were taken to Da Nang.

U.S. Air Force and Navy air strikes paved the way for the helicopters, which still had to weave through a corridor of ground fire from North Vietnamese tanks and anti-aircraft guns on their way into and out of the provincial capital.

Miraculously, no one was injured aboard the helicopters during the rescue operation.

While supporting the effort, an Air Force 0-2 Forward Air Control (FAC) aircraft and A-1 Sandy rescue support fighter were shot down. The FAC pilot bailed out and was rescued by friendly ground forces. The fighter pilot ditched his A-1 in the ocean and was picked up by an Army helicopter.

The first Super Jolly Green

Giant to land received sniper fire from two enemy soldiers. Pararescue specialist (PJ) Sgt. Robert L. LaPointe, of Lynn, Mass., silenced them with bursts from his mini-gun in the rear of the helicopter.

After his helicopter landed, LaPointe jumped out and organized the persons on the

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ground so the operation would go smoothly. He remained on the ground and boarded the second helicopter to land.

The first helicopter picked up 37 evacuees, the second, 45, and the third, 50.

The fourth Super Jolly Green Giant helicopter landed to make sure that all the persons had been picked up. When it was on the ground it received AK-47 automatic weapon and sniper fire from the North Vietnamese in the landing area. PJ Sgt. William J. Thompson, of San Anselmo, Calif., knocked out the AK-47 with bursts of his mini-gun and the sniper fire was suppressed by PJ Sgt. Daniel G. Manion of Richfield Springs, N.Y.

All the HH-53s returned safely to Da Nang.

Besides LaPointe, the crew on the first Jolly Green Giant to land included Maj. Jackson R. Scott Jr., aircraft commander from Summerville, S.C.; Capt. David E. Mullenix, co-pilot from Barkdale, Ark.; Sgt. Ronald W.

Blackwell, flight engineer from Titusville, Fla.; and Sgt. David Young, a PJ from Clinto, Iowa.

The second helicopter crew consisted of Capt. Rodney S. Griffith, aircraft commander from Choctaw, Okla. Maj. Anthony A. Gates, co-pilot from Crossett, Ark.; SSgt. David Garcia, flight engineer from Santa Ana, Calif.; and PJs SSgt. Cole E. Panning, LaPorte, Tex., and Sgt. Charles B. McQuoid II, OF Chicago.

The third HH-53 was crewed by Capt. John R. Weimer, aircraft commander from Akron, Ohio; Capt. Gary A. Dake, co-pilot from Kenfield, N.Y.; SSgt. William A. Simm, flight engineer from Pittsburgh; and PJs Sgt. Michael A. Aillet, Houston, and Sgt. Richard L. Steed, Santa Ana.

Besides Manion and Thompson on the fourth helicopter, were Capt. Donald A. Sutton, aircraft commander from Ridley, Md.; Maj. Jerry J. Gilbert, co-pilot from Lafayette, La.; and SSgt. Jimmie D. Minshew, flight engineer from Gadsden, Ala.