

TFH 6/1: Captains Ronald E. Smith & Dale E. Stovall, USAF

On May 10, 1972, an F-4D *Phantom II* piloted by the [United States Air Force's Major Robert Lodge](#) and weapons officer [Captain Roger Locher](#) was shot down by North Vietnamese fighters deep over communist territory. Locher ejected and parachuted safely to the ground. Lodge did not survive. The other American pilots flying the mission that day were preoccupied with fending off the enemy fighters (shooting down many of them) and didn't see Locher's parachute.

For the next 22 days, Captain Locher managed to evade capture by the North Vietnamese. He spent longer on the ground without being captured than any other downed American airman. He knew that for any possibility of rescue, he'd have to get away from the area and closer to the potential rescue forces. No man had been rescued so deep into North Vietnam.

On June 1, 1972, Locher managed to contact American planes flying overhead using his rescue radio. There was some apprehension that the voice on the radio was Locher - it could be an enemy trick to draw in the vulnerable rescue forces and ambush them. Regardless, the rescue operation was launched.

Two of the pilots who went to rescue their stranded comrade distinguished themselves with such skill and courage in the air that they were awarded the [Air Force Cross](#). The first, [Captain Ronald E. Smith](#), flew an [A-1E Skyraider](#) attack plane. He located Locher in the jungle and guided the rescue helicopter in, all the while exposed to antiaircraft fires. The second was [Captain Dale E. Stovall](#), who flew the [HH-53C](#) rescue helicopter itself.

[Citation for Captain Ronald E. Smith:](#)

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Title 10, Section 8742, United States Code, takes pleasure in presenting the Air Force Cross to Captain Ronald E. Smith, United States Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as an A-1 Tactical Fighter Pilot in Southeast Asia from 1 June 1972 to 2 June 1972. During this period, Captain Smith was on-scene commander for an extremely hazardous and complex search and rescue mission to recover an American crew member in the heavily fortified Red River Valley. In his efforts to locate the survivor, Captain Smith deliberately and repeatedly exposed his slow-moving aircraft to intense anti-aircraft fire to mark and pinpoint the survivor's location. After directing air strikes to silence the threatening hostile forces, he led the vulnerable rescue helicopter to a safe and successful recovery of the downed crew member. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of hostile forces, Captain Smith reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Smith attained the rank of Colonel before his retirement from the Air Force on August 1, 1989. In addition to the Air Force Cross, he was also a two-time recipient of the [Silver Star](#), two [Legions of Merit](#), and six [Distinguished Flying Crosses](#). He is still living.

[Citation for Captain Dale E. Stovall:](#)

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Title 10, Section 8742, United

States Code, takes pleasure in presenting the Air Force Cross to Captain Dale E. Stovall, United States Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as an Aircraft Commander of an HH-53C rescue helicopter of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand, in action in Southeast Asia from 1 June 1972 to 2 June 1972. During this period, Captain Stovall, voluntarily and at great risk to his own life, repeatedly penetrated an extremely hostile and heavily defended area to effect the rescue of a downed American airman. Captain Stovall's first attempt to rescue the airman was thwarted by numerous hostile aircraft and missiles being directed at the rescue force. Determined to save this airman, he willingly returned to this high threat area, braving intense ground fire, to recover the downed airman from deep in North Vietnam. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of hostile forces, Captain Stovall reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

[Stovall retired](#) from the Air Force on June 1, 1993 as a Brigadier General. He is also the recipient of two Silver Stars, two Legions of Merit, and two Distinguished Flying Crosses. He also received the [Defense Superior Service Medal](#) for his work as the Deputy Commanding General of the Joint Special Operations Command. He is also still alive.

Captain Roger Locher was successfully rescued and rejoined with his flying comrades on June 2, 1972.