

RESCUE MISSION IN TONKIN GULF

WOUNDED, CAPTAIN PRICE
HAD NO CHOICE EXCEPT
TO KEEP PULLING
THE RAFT AWAY
FROM FLAMING OIL
AND ENEMY GUNS.

by GLENN INFELD



CAPTAIN DONALD S. PRICE, of Pennsauken, New Jersey, released his safety belt as soon as the HU-16 Albatross amphibian touched down in the Gulf of Tonkin. Leaning far forward in his navigator's compartment, he saw the downed USAF jet pilot bobbing in his bright orange life raft, a few yards to the right of the tail section of the Albatross.

"He's right behind the tail section and a little to the starboard," Price called over the intercom to Captain David Westenbarger, the aircraft commander.

"Roger. Reversing engines."

As he waited for the familiar roar of the propellers to go into reverse pitch, Price glanced nervously at the nearby enemy shore of North Vietnam. It wasn't the first time he had landed in the Gulf of Tonkin in an Albatross. In November, 1965, his crew had pulled a RF-101 reconnaissance pilot out of the water and returned him to his base in South Vietnam. Still, Price couldn't get accustomed to being so close to the enemy coast, to be bobbing up and down in a vulnerable, slow-moving amphibian that was practically under the barrels of Communist guns.

The loud roar of the engines jerked Captain Price's eyes from the enemy shoreline back to the downed jet pilot. The HU-16 eased closer and closer to the raft, then stopped.

"All right, Pleiman, let's get him aboard," pilot Westenbarger called.

Price saw the pararescueman, A1C James E. Pleiman of Russia, Ohio, leap from the rear hatch of the Albatross and swim towards the raft. Captain Price could see that the downed pilot was injured; blood stains speckled the side of the bright orange raft.

WHEN Pleiman reached the raft, the flyer grabbed the line and held on tight. *Good, Price thought. Now as soon as we get the co-pilot, we can get out of here. I wonder—*

Then the barrage of enemy shells began...

The amphibian raised out of the water several inches, its nose higher than its tail. Before he could get a grip on a fuselage brace, Price tumbled backwards to the floor. A fire extinguisher broke loose from its bracket and fell on his stomach; simultaneously, the flare gun smashed against his head. Dazed and confused, the navigator tried to get back on his feet.

Red shells slammed into the hull of the amphibian, tearing jagged holes in the metal. Price, finally managing to struggle to his knees, saw geysers of water fountain skyward alongside the Albatross as the North Vietnamese gunners lobbed 105mm shells at the plane. Stitches of machine-gun fire turned the area into froth, and as Westenbarger gunned the engines of the plane, he added to the deafening blasts of the enemy guns.

"Do you have him inside yet, Pleiman?"

Price heard the pilot frantically trying to contact the pararescuemen on the intercom, but Pleiman didn't answer. Price tried to spot the pararescuemen from his compartment window but the erupting water, and smoke from the exploding shells, disturbed his view.

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RESCUE MISSION IN TONKIN GULF

continued

Grabbing the microphone, Price called, "I'll check on him, Captain."

He ran towards the rear of the amphibian, bounced from one side of the fuselage to the other as near-misses rocked the Albatross. It was obvious that the Communist gunners had held their fire until the amphibian touched down and was most vulnerable, then had opened up with everything they had—from automatic rifle fire to 105mm howitzers. As he fought his way towards the rear hatch to help the pararescue man drag the injured jet pilot into the plane, Price knew that in a matter of minutes the Albatross would be past the flying stage, that it would be shot to pieces unless it could get out of the target area.

At the rear hatch, navigator Price saw the flight mechanic, Sgt. Clyde William Jackson, of Fort Royal, Virginia, leaning far outside the plane in an attempt to help Pleiman drag the downed jet pilot inside the plane. Turning to A1C Robert Hilton, the radio operator, Price bellowed, "Help him! Help him!"

Hilton, however, had already moved to the hatch and was reaching out to grab the side of the raft.

"Try and get him close. We'll pull him in as we take—"

Suddenly, a crashing shell exploded.

Price had seen other 105mm shells hit the water, had heard machine-gun bullets thud into the Albatross, but this time there had been no warning. One moment he had been yelling instructions to the men at the hatch; the next, he had been flying through the air towards the aft bulkhead of the amphibian. The 105mm shell had entered the HU-16 just aft of the right wheel housing, exploded, and opened up a nine-foot hole in the fuselage. Price, not certain of what had happened, had smashed into the bulkhead and fallen to the floor, momentarily stunned.

He fought to open his eyes, to clear his brain, but it was several seconds before he succeeded.

The inside of the plane was a roaring inferno. Gasoline poured from ruptured fuel lines and flamed instantly. A JATO bottle exploded, hurtling pieces of metal through the plane like shrapnel. Price could barely breathe in the stifling heat and the billowing smoke.

"Hilton... Hilton, where are you?"

When there was no answer Price crawled toward the hatch. He had gone only a short distance when he saw the radio operator. One look was enough. Hilton was dead, victim of a direct hit.

"My God!"

THE flames were now threatening to cut off his escape through the hatch so the dazed navigator tried to move faster. As he neared the hatch he grabbed a fuselage brace and started to pull himself to his feet, knowing that his best chance of survival was to dive as far from the amphibian as possible. It was obvious that the plane was going to explode.

As he regained his feet he saw a dark object floating in the water beside the aircraft, not recognizing it until an enemy shell hit nearby and a wave turned it towards him.

"Pleiman!"

The pararescue man was dead, too. Approximately five feet from the dead airman, Price spotted the orange raft with the injured jet pilot still inside it.

The flyer was staring at him helplessly.

"I'll get you if—"

At that moment, as Price tensed to dive out of the burning amphibian, a second JATO bottle exploded. The flash of fire hit the navigator in the face, searing his hair, face and eyebrows. It also blinded him, and before the stunned captain could regain his balance, he tumbled out of the hatch and into the water, into the midst of flaming oil and gasoline and the exploding enemy shells...

The fine work of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service in Southeast Asia is well known. The pickup rate for downed USAF, Navy and Marine pilots is high; some flyers barely get their feet wet before an air rescue aircraft plucks them from the water. Sometimes, however, it is not quite so easy, and the mission of March 14, 1966, was one of the most rugged yet experienced.

When it ended an HU-16 amphibian had been sunk for the first time since 1949, when the HU-16 originally went into service, and one member of the rescue crew received the Air Force Cross—the nation's second highest military award for valor.

The mission began routinely. A Phantom F4B jet, operated by Air Force Major James M. Peerson and his copilot, Captain Lynwood C. Bryant, was hit by enemy ground fire as it came off target in North Vietnam, about 50 miles west of the Gulf of Tonkin. Peerson immediately guided his crippled plane towards the water, and radioed for help.

"Mayday, Mayday! Crown Alpha this is Pluto Lead. Hit by ground fire. Heading for the gulf to eject. Present position is 20 miles southwest of Thanh Hoa."

THE amphibian carrying navigator

Price and his crew had been circling over the Gulf of Tonkin when the distress call had been picked up. The pilot had immediately banked his Albatross southwest and raced to the area at full speed. Meanwhile, another Phantom jet notified the 4500-ton destroyer USS Berkeley, sailing in the Gulf of Tonkin to coordinate rescue efforts, of the position of the damaged aircraft.

"This is Pluto Two. Two-man crew ejecting now. Estimated touch-down position is seven miles offshore near Hon Me Island."

When Price heard the position report he studied the map on his navigation table for several seconds before calling his aircraft commander on the intercom. Price didn't like what he saw on the map.

"Captain, if they land near Hon Me Island as reported, we may be in trouble. The Communists have enough guns on the island to fight a major battle."

Westenbarger agreed, but both men knew they had no choice. If their plane reached the scene first, it was their duty to go down after the flyers.

"The Yorktown is sending three helicopters to the scene," the captain told Price, "but they're still a long way off."

Ten minutes later the amphibian orbited two miles south of Hon Me Island, the crew searching the waters below

for some sign of Peerson and Bryant.

"Are you picking up their beeper?" Price asked.

"Roger. We hear it. They're in the area. Now, if we can just spot them."

Two Navy Skyraiders were also circling in the vicinity, flying protective cover for the downed men. In the distance Price saw the helicopters approaching from the Yorktown and, farther south, the Berkeley was heading toward Hon Me Island. It was obvious that all airborne and sea rescue units expected trouble in the rescue attempt because of the proximity of the enemy guns on the island. The only salvation would be if the two downed pilots had drifted away from the area after their parachutes opened.

"I don't see them anyplace," Pleiman called from the rear of the aircraft. Perhaps they are further away from—"

Suddenly the pararescue man stopped talking for several seconds; then he yelled, "I see them! Right below us!"

"Near the island."

"Yeah. Too close, Captain. Too close to the Reds. Look directly east of the sharp point of Hon Me."

Price looked down at the island, spotted the point of land referred to by Pleiman, and moved his eyes east. Suddenly he saw the bright orange raft, barely the size of a penny from altitude. "Mighty close to those guns," he muttered. "Mighty close."

Westenbarger spotted the downed Air Force pilot about the same time and made the only decision possible. "Pilot to crew—going down. Jettisoning external fuel tanks now."

"Roger."

"We won't have much time," he continued. "Pleiman, as soon as we touch down, go out the hatch. The others will give you a hand. Price, have you seen any gunfire from the island yet?"

"Not one burst," the navigator said, searching the dot of land in the Gulf of Tonkin with his glasses. "According to Intelligence the Reds have the island packed with guns, but so far it appears that S-2 might be wrong."

"I hope so."

Price continued to watch Hon Me Island as pilot Westenbarger eased the Albatross towards the water. When he flew close to the island, Westenbarger steepened his dive to avoid the expected enemy fire, but no shells came their way. It was as though the island was deserted. A few feet off the surface of the gulf, Westenbarger broke his glide, held the nose high, cut the throttles, and full-stalled the amphibian into the water. As soon as he brought the amphibian to a complete stop, Price began directing him to the downed jet pilot in the raft.

"He's right behind the tail section and a little to the starboard."

Still no gunfire came from the Communist-held island. Price, tense and expectant, was amazed at the lack of resistance. By the time Pleiman reached the raft, Price decided that the briefing officers had overrated the enemy capabilities. "Now as soon as we get the copilot, we can get out of here. I wonder..."

Seconds later the first enemy shell hit the Albatross and within five minutes two of the crew were dead, and the others were floundering in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. As for the amphibian, it had disappeared beneath the surface...

Price was still underwater when he opened his eyes. The navigator felt as if his lungs were about to burst. Fighting



PRICE

"Over here..."

the instinct to inhale, knowing that he would choke, the captain tried to force his way to the surface of the gulf. When he raised his arms, however, sharp pains knifed through his back. It was his first indication that he was wounded. Despite the pain, Price used his arms to propel himself up until his head finally broke through the surface and he could once again breathe.

"Help! Help!"

Price heard the plea above the steady roar of the enemy gunfire, but he was so exhausted that several seconds elapsed before he regained enough strength to turn toward the man in trouble. When he did, he saw jet pilot Peerson in his raft, only a few feet away. At the same instant oil from the amphibian, floating on the surface of the gulf, caught fire. Realizing that both he and the jet pilot would be trapped in the flames if they didn't clear the area, Price swam to the raft and started pushing it east, to the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin and away from Hon Me Island. Peerson looked at the navigator and muttered weakly, "You're wounded."

Price had already noticed that the water around him was stained red. This fact, added to the pain when he raised his arms and the burning sensation in his back, made it obvious that fragments of the same shell which had sunk the Albatross had also hit him. Wounded or not, Captain Price knew he had no alternative except to keep swimming away from the flaming oil and the enemy guns.

It was slow, arduous work for Price as he fought to keep his head above water and at the same time push the raft with the downed pilot in it. The Communists were lobbing their mortar shells at the raft in a steady stream, and as they burst and sent geysers of water skyward, the resulting waves lapped over Price's head. They also rocked the raft and threatened to dump pilot Peerson into the gulf.

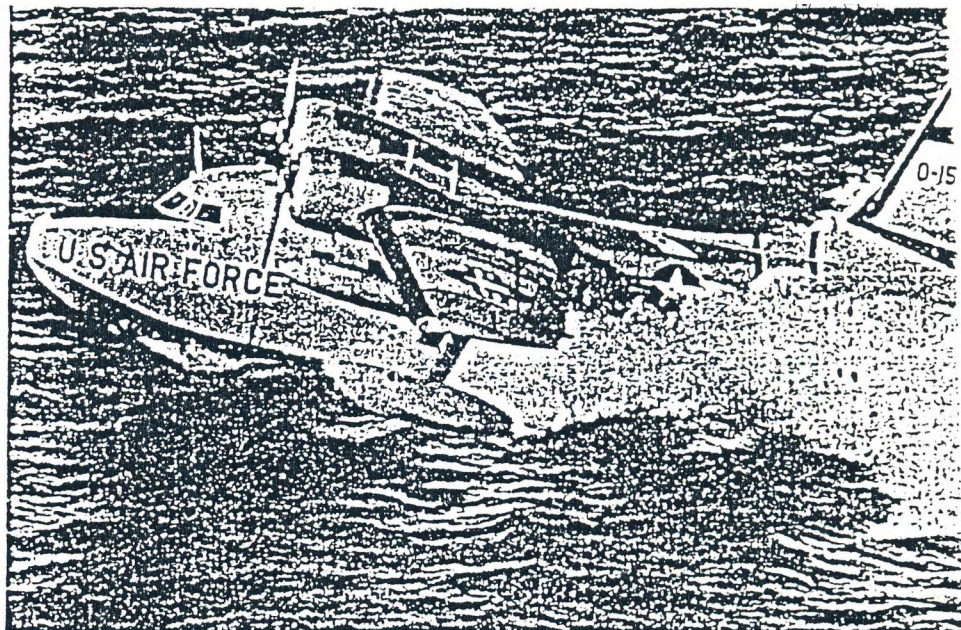
"Help! Help!"

Again Price heard someone in distress. Holding onto the raft with one hand he searched the surrounding water. Finally he saw a head bob out of the water, then disappear again. It was the flight mechanic, S/Sgt. Clyde W. Jackson, of Fort Royal, Virginia. Price knew that he had neither the strength nor the time to help Jackson. The man was too far away. At that moment, however, Price saw the co-pilot of the Albatross, William E. Hall, swimming a few yards south of the mechanic. Evidently the wind had carried the flight mechanic's plea for help away from Hall, since he wasn't even looking in Jackson's direction.

"Get that man right behind you!" Price screamed.

The co-pilot looked up, a startled expression on his face as the navigator's words reached him through the din of the exploding shells. Price saw Hall turn, spotted the bobbing head of the flight mechanic and move quickly to the man's side.

SATISFIED that Jackson was getting the aid he so desperately needed, Price turned his attention back to Peerson and the raft. He had never been so tired in his life. His eyes and face, burned by the blast of the JATO bottle, hurt. So did the shell fragments in his back, and the loss of blood, plainly evident by the red trail which marked his path in the water. His strength sapped, Price looked at the injured jet pilot in the raft; he wondered how much longer he would be able to help him.



Albatross similar to one which put Price down in Gulf of Tonkin lands in water.

Suddenly a deafening noise clogged Price's ears and he felt a heavy weight on his back, and the navigator was convinced that he was having hallucinations. He was, that is, until the weight lifted momentarily and hit him again with a resounding thump. Surprised, Price looked around behind him and couldn't believe his eyes.

"It can't be..."

It was. The throbbing noise, filling his ears along with the blasts of enemy shells, came from an SH-3 helicopter hovering directly above. The chopper's rescue sling was the "weight" on his back! Grabbing the sling, Price threw it into the raft and yelled, "Put it on... put it around you!"

Price watched the struggling jet pilot attempt to slip inside the rescue sling, but Peerson was too weak. Boosting himself up on the side of the raft, Price forced the sling over Peerson's head and motioned for the helicopter to pull up the major. An instant later Peerson was lifted from the raft and hoisted towards the door of the chopper.

A few yards away Price saw another helicopter picking up the remainder of the Albatross crew and the other jet pilot. Holding onto the side of the small raft that Peerson had been in, Price felt better despite the heavy gunfire still directed at him from the island. As soon as the chopper lowered the sling and picked him up, they could clear the scene and get back to the nearby carrier. It seemed to Price that he had been in the water for hours.

"Here! ... Over here!"

The captain heard the voice and recognized it instantly. He spotted Sergeant Jackson a few yards away, alone and foundering in the water. Later, Price learned that co-pilot Hall had tried to carry the chopper rescue sling over to the flight mechanic, but before he reached Jackson the whirlybird crew had hoisted Hall out of the water, leaving the crewman behind.

"Hold on, Jackson... I'll get you."

Price hated to leave the raft, but he had no choice. He swam to the injured Jackson, slipped an arm around him and started to dog-paddle back to the raft. At that moment he spotted the SH-3 heading toward them and he stopped. He watched the rescue sling swoop down, made a desperate grab as it started past, and snagged it.

"Get this on, Jackson," Price said.

Quickly he put the injured, exhausted flight mechanic in the sling, and before he could even wave, the chopper crew was pulling Jackson out of the water. Price saw several bullets penetrate the side of the helicopter but it remained airborne, pivoting in the sky as only a chopper can and head for a nearby ship.

Captain Price was now alone in the water. All the others, except the two dead crewmen, had been picked up. For a few minutes the navigator thought that it was only a matter of time until he, too, would be hoisted to safety... But as the two rescue helicopters disappeared from the scene he began to wonder. He saw them touch down on the ships, but they didn't take off again. Had he been forgotten? Was it possible that he had been given up for dead, too? One man in the Gulf of Tonkin was almost indiscernible to the human eye. Perhaps in the confusion of the rescue attempt there had been a miscount. Certainly after a head count was taken the rescuers would learn that he was unaccounted for, but by then it would be too late. Much too late.

Using nearly all his remaining strength Price climbed into Peerson's raft, only to discover that he was drifting dangerously close to the shore of Hon Me Island. Wearily he slid back into the water and started swimming toward the open sea, dragging the raft behind him. Exhausted, bleeding, discouraged, he still refused to give up. He was determined to keep trying—until he blacked out or was hit by one of the Red shells.

Suddenly the entire sky seemed to explode. Two Air Force F-4s roared across the Gulf of Tonkin at wave-top level, firing their rockets and machine guns at the enemy gunners on the island. Two junks that were heading in Price's direction suddenly burst into flames and sank. A Skyraider followed the jets and bombed the beach. Smoke and debris flew skyward and the concussion even jolted Price in the water.

"They didn't forget me," he muttered, fighting to keep his head above water.

A minute later Price saw a small UH-2 helicopter flying slowly through the curtain of fire towards him, a rescue sling dangling behind. The chopper came lumbering in, oblivious of the enemy shells. The rescue collar dropped only a few feet (Continued on page 74)

Rescue Mission

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from the navigator and the helicopter crewman in the hatch yanked it into Price's arms. Quickly, Price slipped it under his arms. This time he ignored the pain as he waved his arms, signaling them to lift him out of enemy waters.

As they pulled him inside the chopper, the crewman at the winch grinned. "Better late than never!"

Price could only nod and mutter, "Thanks."

The navigator was taken to an aircraft carrier where a doctor picked out the shrapnel and stitched his wounds. After two weeks in the hospital, Donald Price was back on Okinawa with the 33rd Aerospace Rescue and Recover Squadron, ready for action. He doesn't say much about his experience, but the men he saved made certain that Washington was told about his heroic action. Consequently in September, 1966, six months after the mission, Captain Donald S. Price was awarded the Air Force Cross, the first navigator to receive the nation's second highest military medal for valor.

No man deserved it more.

