



FOR VALOR—HH-43 crew from the 38th ARSg are shown after receiving Silver Stars for daring rescue of downed pilot in North Vietnam. Left to right are Capt Joe E. Ballinger, Capt Bruce C. Hepp, 1stLt Walter F. Turk and SSgt Roberto Rodriguez. (USAF photo)

11q 2AD, Tan Son Nhut Afd, RVN— Silver Stars have been presented by Air Force four-star Gen Hunter Harris to four members of the Air Rescue Service in ceremonies here. General Harris, commander of Pacific Air Forces, presented the nation's third highest award for valor to Capt Bruce C. Hepp, Capt Joe E. Ballinger, 1stLt Walter F. Turk, and SSgt Roberto Rodriguez. Along with four other HH-43 HUSKIE helicopter crewmembers scheduled for departure from the Republic of Vietnam, the four new Silver Star winners flew deep into Communist North Vietnam to perform the dangerous rescue of a downed Air Force pilot. Air Rescue Service officials say all eight crewmembers have won the Silver Star, but the other four — Capt Stanley O. Schaetzle, A2c Richard A. Wallace, A1c William A. Robinson and A2c Marvin F. Brenaman — were to receive the award at a later date.

The official citation accompanying the Silver Stars said the mission flown by the Air Rescue Service airmen "required a flight of more than 200 miles" over hostile territory. But that was only part of the story.

On May 17, an F-105 Thunderchief jet was downed by enemy groundfire along the Song Ba river near Route 7, Northwest of Vinh. The pilot, Capt James J. Taliaferro, Jr., bailed out and landed safely in the midst of a large number of enemy troops. Captain Taliaferro landed in a dense bamboo forest on a hillside and the thick undergrowth ham-

pered enemy forces trying to reach him.

Piloted by Captain Hepp and Lieutenant Turk, two HH-43 helicopters headed for the spot. The choppers carried extra fuel drums, making possible the long flight to and from the pick-up spot. Enroute to the target area, the choppers were hindered by heavy rain and clouds. They were also forced to detour around known flak positions. At the pick-up spot, fighter aircraft flying rescue cover were busy suppressing enemy ground fire. Tracers were coming up from the ground as near as a quarter-mile from where Captain Taliaferro was hiding. Captain Hepp said he spotted the downed pilot's orange-and-white parachute and also received an electronic homing signal from Captain Taliaferro. The fighter pilot also set off a smoke flare to help the chopper crews locate him.

"The rescap fighters continued trying to suppress the ground fire with 20mm cannon as we descended to make the pick-up," Captain Hepp recalled. "As we got lower, Captain Schaetzle, Sergeant Rodriguez and Airman Wallace began answering enemy fire with their M-16 rifles."

The heaviest enemy fire, believed to be from .50-caliber machine guns and small arms, was coming from about 50 yards behind and below the hovering chopper. The second helicopter, piloted by Lieutenant Turk, descended and orbited the lead chopper. As Lieutenant Turk handled

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the controls, Captain Ballinger and Airmen Robinson and Brenaman cut loose with their M-16s at ground forces firing at them. As the fierce gunfight continued, Captain Hepp descended as low as possible.

"It was impossible to move the chopper nearer than about 20 feet from Captain Taliaferro's position," the rescue pilot said. "Our blades were clearing trees by five feet or less and undergrowth was brushing underneath us." The bamboo at the scene was almost 100 feet high.

"We ran out 100 feet of hoist cable and waited for Captain Taliaferro to reach the hoist sling so we could pull him up," Captain Hepp continued.

The downed pilot took five minutes to reach the sling, so dense was the undergrowth. But once in the sling, he was immediately hoisted aboard the hovering chopper. As Captain Taliaferro came aboard the helicopter, the rescap fighters fired a salvo of 2.75 rockets at the enemy troops who had moved in even closer, and the F-105 pilot joined the rescue crewmen in firing at the Communist Forces. Drawing his .38-caliber revolver, Captain Taliaferro began shooting at the spots where tracers were still blazing. Tracers followed the choppers as they pulled away.

Immediately following the mission, General Harris sent the following message to the 38th Air Rescue Squadron here: "My personal con-

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