



# The Airmen Heritage Series

## The Airmen Memorial Museum



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# For Extraordinary Heroism"





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# "For Extraordinary Heroism"

## The Enlisted Air Force Cross Recipients

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*This photo, which depicts A1C William Robinson (right) when he was a POW, was the inspiration for the Vietnamese stamp that would come to be known as "The Man and the Mouse."*

C/O W. Robinson Collection, AMM

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On July 6, 1960, Congress established the Air Force Cross. The Air Force Cross was created for Air Force personnel and is a version of the Distinguished Service Cross (which is awarded to members of the U.S. Army). The Air Force Cross is awarded for "extraordinary heroism, not justifying the award of a Medal of Honor, to any person, serving with the USAF engaged in action against an enemy of the U.S., engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing force, or serving with friendly forces engaged in conflict against an opposing armed force in which the U.S. is not a belligerent party." The Air Force Cross is the nation's second highest military honor that can be bestowed upon a member of the USAF. Since its inception over 40 years ago, 21 enlisted men have been awarded the Air Force Cross. (NOTE: 2 enlisted men in WW I, 147 in WW II and 2 in Korea were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross while serving with the USAF or one of its predecessor organizations.)

### A3C ARTHUR N. BLACK AND A1C WILLIAM A. ROBINSON

A3C Arthur Black was a pararescueman (PJ) with the 38<sup>th</sup> Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) and A1C William "Bill" Robinson was a helicopter mechanic on a rescue mission launched from Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Royal Thai Air Base (RTAB), Thailand. Their mission on September 20, 1965, was to locate a downed F-105 pilot somewhere 40 miles south of Vinh, North Vietnam. After an 80-mile flight to the area where the pilot was stranded, Black and Robinson, flying aboard an HH-43F Huskie, spotted the downed flier. Both Robinson and Black acted with total disregard for their own safety in their attempt to rescue the pilot. As they were bringing the pilot up on the rescue hoist from the jungle



floor 90 feet below, the aircraft began receiving heavy enemy fire. The helicopter became disabled and plummeted to the ground. Everyone aboard the helicopter survived the crash. All four crewmen were soon captured by the North Vietnamese ground forces, thus beginning their time as POWs.

Robinson and Black soon found themselves to be guests of the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prison. There, for the next seven-plus years, they would endure being tortured with ropes and leg irons. Poor rations were also the norm as they would often get only a cup of rice for breakfast and a cup of water for lunch. Even these meager portions were not without their faults. "The rice was spiced with bugs and rat droppings," remembered Robinson. "Some guys took longer than others to quit fasting. Eventually everyone learned to ignore the 'crawlies.'"

A1C Robinson became somewhat famous during his time as a "guest" of the North Vietnamese. He was featured on a Vietnamese stamp that was referred to as "The Man and the Mouse." This stamp depicted a tiny teenage Vietcong girl guarding a huge American POW. The man's image on that stamp was a likeness of Robinson.

During their time as 2 of the 100 prisoners at the "Hilton," Col John P. Flynn, the senior POW at the prison, decided to give both men battlefield commissions. In 1968, after putting the two through the Air Force POW Officers' own version of Officer Candidates School, the enlisted men were unofficially commissioned by Flynn as officers. When Black and Robinson were finally released in 1973, they were eventually offered direct presidential appointments to Second Lieutenant. That same year, Black and Robinson were presented with the Air Force Cross.

The time in prison had taken its toll. Robinson had dropped 60 pounds and had to have surgery on both of his legs when he returned home. The native North Carolinian soon realized that he was out of touch with what had gone on in the world while he was in prison. "I learned Neil Armstrong had walked on the moon from a matchbook in the middle of 1970."

Both Black and Robinson would go on to serve in the Air Force for many more years. Black went through pilot training and flew C-130s for a while before becoming a T-37 instructor pilot at Mather AFB, California. In 1987, after achieving the rank of Major in the USAF, Black retired to Pennsylvania. Robinson rose to the rank of Captain and became an aircraft maintenance officer with the 33<sup>rd</sup> Component Repair Squadron at Eglin AFB, Florida. Robinson retired in 1984 at the age of 41 and currently resides in De Funiak Springs, Florida.

## **A1C WILLIAM H. PITSENBARGER**

On April 11, 1966, A1C William "Bill" Pitsenbarger was a PJ aboard an HH-43F Huskie launched from Bien Hoa AB, Republic of Vietnam (RVN). The crew's mission was to attempt to rescue U.S. Army casualties engaged in a firefight 45 miles east of Saigon near Cam My, RVN. As the helicopter was hovering over the area, the 21-year-old airman could see that



*A1C William Pitsenbarger, seen here on October 1, 1965, was KIA six months after this photo was taken. Pitsenbarger, who was awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously, is currently being considered for an upgrade to the Medal of Honor.*  
C/O F. Pitsenbarger Collection, AMM



the troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division were still battling a powerful first-line Vietcong (VC) Battalion. It was evident that the survivors on the ground needed help loading casualties onto the litter (stretcher) that the HH-43B had lowered to them. Pitsenbarger, known to all of his friends as "Pits," sprang into action.

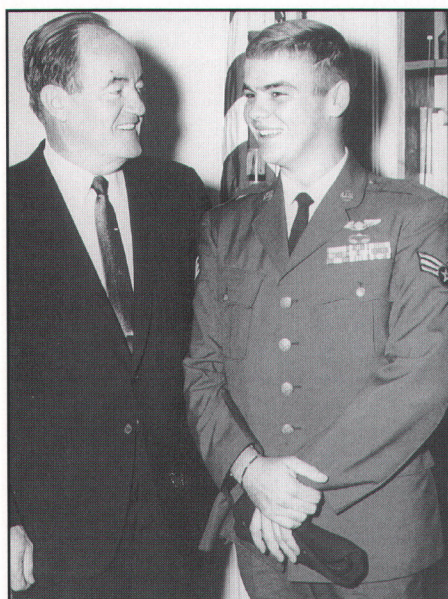
After obtaining his pilot's permission to do so, the young man from rural Ohio (with the aid of a fellow crew member) lowered himself to the jungle floor. The Huskie and another HH-43 were able to extract nine casualties from the area before they were forced to withdraw after receiving heavy ground fire. This left the young airman from Detachment 6, 38th ARRS, on the ground with seven remaining casualties and over 100 Army infantry troops.

The firefight soon worsened for the Americans. Pits, who had been caring for the wounded after the Huskie departed, realized that many of the soldiers who were still trading gunfire with the VC, were running out of ammunition. Pitsenbarger, on his own initiative, risked his own life by dodging enemy bullets in order to distribute weapons and ammunition to his comrades. Pits, who gave his own weapon away, eventually replaced his M-16 and began to return semi-automatic fire at the enemy. As time wore on, more and more soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division became casualties. Eventually, VC forces, whose numerical strength tripled that of the Americans, overran their position. Sometime during the fighting, Bill Pitsenbarger was killed. He had been hit four times by enemy gunfire.

Pitsenbarger's friend and fellow PJ, A1C Henry "Harry" O'Beirne, arrived on the scene the next morning. He found that the battle had ended and that 106 of the 134 men belonging to the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division had been killed or wounded. O'Beirne, upon examining Pitsenbarger's body, theorized that Pits had been hit twice before receiving the two fatal shots. Surviving members of the 1st Infantry Division told O'Beirne and others of Pitsenbarger's bravery. Five months later, on September 22, 1966,

Pitsenbarger's parents received the Air Force Cross that was posthumously awarded to their son.

### **A2C DUANE D. HACKNEY**



*A2C Duane Hackney (right) who is seen here with Vice President Hubert Humphrey in 1967, was the first living man to receive the Air Force Cross. C/O The Enlisted Heritage Hall*

Airman Hackney was a PJ with the 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS when he and his fellow HH-3E crew members launched from Da Nang Air Base, RVN, on February 6, 1967. Their mission aboard their unarmed Jolly Green Giant was to search for an injured O-1F Birdog pilot near the Mu Gia Pass, Northwest of Dong Hoi, North Vietnam. On their first sortie into the heavily defended hostile area, Hackney volunteered to be lowered into the jungle to search for the survivor. He searched until ordered to evacuate because the two helos needed to return to base due to foul weather. Later that day the helos were launched a second time and, once again, Hackney was lowered to the ground. After securing the survivor into a stokes litter, both were lifted out. As they left the area, intense 37MM flak tore into the helicopter amidship. The flak caused extensive damage and created a raging fire inside the helo. With complete disregard for his own safety, Hackney fitted his patient with his own parachute. In this moment of impending disaster, Hackney chose to place his responsibility to the survivor above



his own life. The courageous Michigan native located a replacement parachute for himself. He had just slipped his arms through the harness when a second 37MM round struck the crippled aircraft's fuel line. The force of the explosion blew Hackney through the open cargo door. He fell more than 300 feet and was knocked unconscious after landing on a rock ledge. The hastily donned, partially opened parachute had saved his life. When another HH-3 rescued the dazed young airman moments after the explosion, he had suffered 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns, and numerous scrapes and bruises. Hackney was the only one of the six men aboard the downed helicopter to survive the crash.

Within a few weeks, the rugged, young airman was back in action. In 1967, Hackney received the Cheney Award and was also named the Military Airlift Command's Man of the Year. His highest honor that year, though, came at Scott AFB, Illinois, when he was presented with the Air Force Cross in front of his mother, father (who was a Silver Star recipient in WW II) and two sisters.

Having been awarded 72 medals prior to his retirement as a CMSgt from the USAF in 1991, Hackney distinguished himself as the most decorated PJ of all time. During his two tours (three years) in Vietnam, he had flown 200 combat missions. His record included dropping into the jungle of Southeast Asia between 40-60 times to search for downed airmen. Hackney died of a heart attack in 1993 at the age of 46.

### **SGT RUSSELL M. HUNT**

Twenty-year-old Sgt Russell Hunt was enjoying a movie at Nha Trang Air Base, RVN on the night of March 30, 1967, when he was summoned for a briefing. The West Virginian soon learned that 130 U.S. troops were pinned down by over 700 VC. The Americans were low on ammunition, out of water and had a growing number of casualties. The young mechanic and his four fellow crew members would be in the lead helicopter on a mission to take in supplies and bring out the wounded.

They arrived over the battlefield, a five square mile area of bomb-cratered hill country, in the early morning hours of March 31, 1967. The UH-1 helicopter, with Hunt aboard, was attempting to lower supplies to the ground troops when the Huey began receiving heavy enemy fire. The helicopter went into a nose dive and crashed in the jungle. All five crew members survived the crash. Hunt, and those crewmen who were not too severely wounded from the crash, gathered what supplies they could find. Disregarding his own crash injuries and the continuous hostile fire, Sgt Hunt treated the wounded as the VC closed in around the men.

Soon Hunt and the others decided that they needed to move to a better extraction point for a helicopter rescue attempt. The selected area was near a river almost a mile away, and the Huey's pilot had such a severe abdominal injury from the crash that he had to be carried the entire distance. "It was 110 degrees and Major Baldwin (the pilot) weighed 190 pounds," recalled Sgt Hunt. Hunt and A1C Sandy Pratcher carried their mortally wounded aircraft commander through the dense jungle to the river. Upon their arrival, Hunt was unable to revive the badly bleeding pilot. The medic checked on Baldwin and informed Hunt that he was dead. "That's what gets you," stated Hunt. "You do all you can and it's still not enough."

Hunt and the others began working at clearing a landing zone for rescue helicopters. The tight landing area forced Hunt to stand in the middle of the clearing and manually guide the helicopters in, braving enemy gunfire the entire time. The pilot of the first helicopter, Major Robert D. Allen, described



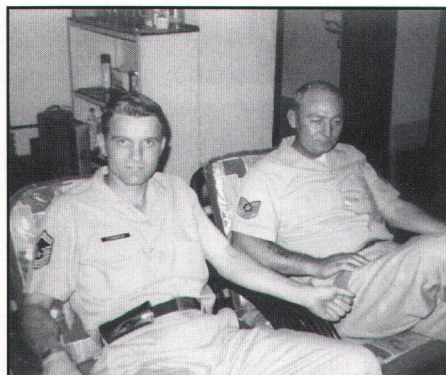
the young sergeant's actions. "There was old Hunt, as cool as a crew chief on a stateside ramp, waving me down through the clearing he had helped make."

The 20th Helicopter Squadron member would act as a guide for two more helicopters landing among the chaos of injured soldiers and VC gunfire. He left aboard the third helicopter, only after making sure that all the more seriously wounded casualties had been evacuated on the previous two. For his tireless and heroic efforts, Sgt Russell Hunt was awarded the Air Force Cross.

### **SSGT EUGENE L. CLAY AND SGT LARRY W. MAYSEY**

On November 8, 1967, as the fighting raged around Khe Sanh, RVN, casualties were quickly mounting. Earlier in the day, two rescue helicopters had been shot down while attempting to extract the surviving five members of a special forces reconnaissance team. As evening fell, the enemy knew that there would be another rescue attempt either that night or early the next morning, and used the survivors as bait by setting up a deadly "flak trap" for the rescue force. Nighttime fell as two HH-3 Jolly Green Giants were dispatched to evacuate the surviving crewmen of the two crashed helicopters. SSgt Clay, a flight engineer, and Sgt Maysey, a pararescueman, were aboard one of the two HH-3s.

The first Jolly Green Giant to arrive (which Clay and Maysey were not on) departed quickly after receiving heavy enemy fire while rescuing three casualties. The HH-3, carrying Clay and Maysey, landed on the jungle floor. As Sgt Maysey exited the helicopter to search for the wounded, SSgt Clay "covered him" with a machine gun. Maysey returned with the one injured American he had found. At that time the pilot, Capt Gerald O. Young, seeing numerous encircling enemy, determined it was time to depart. Capt Young stated that, "The enemy were so close you could see them."



*CMSgt Richard Etchberger (left), seen here in 1967, was awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously in 1968. Etchberger's Air Force Cross did not become public knowledge until 1998. C/O Etchberger Family Collection, AMM*

After Maysey and the wounded man scrambled aboard the Jolly Green Giant, Young began to lift the HH-3 off the ground. They weren't very far off the jungle floor when the helo was struck by an enemy rocket propelled grenade (RPG) round in the right engine. This caused the engine to explode and the helicopter crashed upside-down and burst into flames. Capt Young was the only survivor of the crash. SSgt Eugene Clay and Sgt Larry Maysey were both posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross.

### **CMSGT RICHARD L. ETCHBERGER**

On March 10, 1968, Lima Site 85 in Laos came under attack by North Vietnamese troops. This mountaintop radar site had only 19 non-combatant American technicians assigned to it to help direct the radar bombing of targets in and around North Vietnam. CMSgt Richard "Dick" Etchberger was a team chief at Lima Site 85.

During the early morning hours of March 11, 1968, Etchberger and four comrades found themselves huddled on the side of a cliff exchanging gunfire with Dac Cong (North Vietnamese special forces) troops. Two of the Americans were quickly killed, while two others were wounded. Only CMSgt Etchberger remained unwounded to defend his trapped companions.



More than five hours later, just before 8 a.m., an Air America (CIA-owned airline) UH-1 Huey came to a hover over the cliff. First, Etchberger assisted the two wounded technicians onto the rescue hoist that had been lowered by the helicopter. As it came to be Etchberger's turn to ride up the hoist, another surviving American (who had been hiding from the Dac Cong elsewhere on the mountain) came running toward him. Etchberger grabbed the man, who had been drawn to the cliff by the sound of the Huey, and bear-hugging each other, the two survivors rode up the hoist together. During this rescue, the Huey was strafed by enemy ground fire. As Etchberger climbed inside the helicopter, bullets tore through the floor of the UH-1. A single bullet struck Etchberger. The Pennsylvania native bled to death before he reached the hospital in Thailand.

In December 1968, Etchberger's wife and three sons accepted his posthumous Air Force Cross at a top secret ceremony held in the Pentagon. Etchberger's Air Force Cross was top secret since the action he received it for had taken place in Laos, which by international treaty, was a neutral country during the Vietnam War. The engagement at Lima Site 85 would not be declassified until 1982. CMSgt Dick Etchberger's Air Force Cross would not become a matter of public record (due to a USAF oversight) until 1998, 30 years after his heroic action.

### **SGT NACEY KENT JR.**

Sgt Kent was a flight engineer on an AC-47 "Spooky" gunship that was defending Pleiku Air Base, RVN, against a North Vietnamese (NVA) rocket and mortar attack on May 5, 1968. The AC-47 wasn't in the air long before the enemy directed fire at the gunship. The AC-47 was shot down, but Sgt Kent survived the crash, sustaining only a broken leg. Despite the seriousness of his injury, Kent helped evacuate other crewmen from the gunship, and, miraculously, carried the wounded navigator out of the burning aircraft. The Sgt then returned to the flaming wreckage to help fight the fire. For his determination and courage, Sgt Nacey Kent Jr. received the Air Force Cross.

### **SGT THOMAS A. NEWMAN**

On Memorial Day 1968 (May 30th), Col Norman P. Phillip's F-105 was shot down after being raked by 37mm fire just north of the city of Tchepone, Laos. By the time he was parachuting to earth, he had a broken arm, dislocated shoulder, compressed vertebrae and injuries to his pelvis. Later that afternoon Sgt Thomas Newman, a PJ assigned to Det 1, 40<sup>th</sup> ARRS, was in the HH-3 Jolly Green Giant, Huskie that arrived on the scene above Phillip's bailout point.

In the failing light, Newman was unable to spot the stranded pilot from the air. He volunteered to be lowered into the jungle knowing that there had been reports of VC in the area searching for Phillips. Once on the ground, Newman was unable to find the pilot but heard the sounds made by the searching VC. He radioed the HH-3 that he was shutting down his radio to prevent the enemy from locating his position. As the HH-3 departed the area, it damaged its dangling jungle penetrator and had to return to Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand. Col Phillips, realizing the rescue helo was departing, fired two tracer shots from his sidearm to alert the helo to his location. After locating and identifying Phillips in the dense undergrowth, Newman called for a pickup. A waiting HH-53 crew from Udorn, RTAFB, Thailand, lowered their hoist for the recovery. Col Phillips was in such poor shape that he had to be assisted in boarding the rescue cable. During this maneuver, Newman lost sight of the cable in the vines and radioed for the helo crew to raise some of the excess cable off the ground. While raising

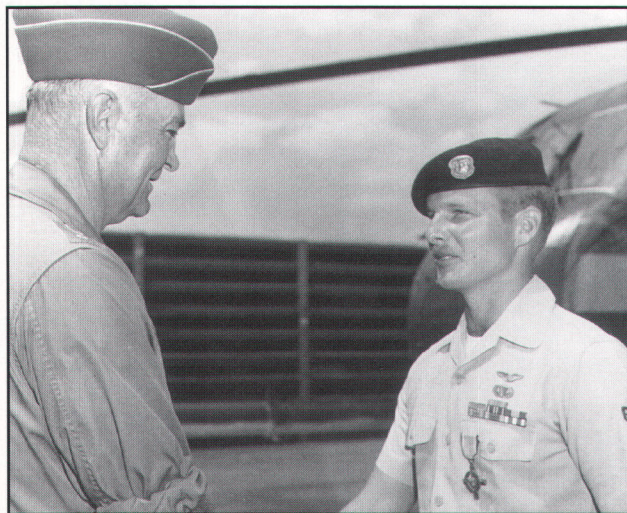


the hoist, Newman's foot became entangled in the cable and he was pulled skyward, dangling upside down. He lost his radio and weapon, although the radio was still attached to him. Sergeant Newman radioed the helo that he was ensnared and they began lowering him to the ground. As he was descending, he could see automatic weapons fire directed at the helo from approximately 50-75 yards away. He became enmeshed in the branches as he was descending through the jungle canopy. Separated from the cable, he fell the final 20 feet, badly spraining his left wrist. Despite his injury, the PJ quickly climbed back aboard the hoist. Together the two airmen rode the cable up to the helo while Newman shielded the colonel with his own body. Once on board the helicopter, Newman treated Phillips for shock as well as his other injuries. For his outstanding bravery, Sgt Newman was decorated with both the 1968 Cheney Award and the Air Force Cross.

Sgt Thomas Newman left the USAF in 1969, one year after his heroic rescue of Col Phillips. After leaving the USAF, the Wisconsin native married, had a child and reenlisted for a second tour as a PJ. Following his second tour, Sgt Newman separated again and returned to college attending the R.O.T.C. program at the University of Albuquerque, New Mexico. He graduated in 1980 and accepted an Air Force commission, eventually retiring in 1994 as a Major. Since his military retirement, he has pursued a career in public service and currently resides in San Antonio, Texas.

## **A1C JOEL E. TALLEY**

A1C Joel Talley's first combat mission would be a memorable one. When he departed DaNang AB, RVN, for the July 2, 1968, mission, Talley had been in Southeast Asia for less than one month. The



*A1C Joel Talley (right) shakes hands with General Howell M. Estes Jr. after Talley received the Air Force Cross on May 24, 1969. Talley was awarded the Air Force Cross on his first combat mission.*  
C/O USAF

previous day, Lt Colonel Jack Modica had bailed out of his F-105, just northwest of Dong Hoi, North Vietnam. In their efforts to rescue Modica shortly after he was shot down, three helicopters were driven off by enemy ground fire. The next day, the same thing happened to the first HH-3 on the scene. During this attempt, a supporting A-1 Skyraider was shot down by the North Vietnamese. The second Jolly Green Giant to arrive on the scene that day transported PJ Talley.

After spotting Modica's smoke flare, Talley volunteered to be lowered into the jungle despite evidence it might be an NVA Search and Rescue (SAR) trap. After a 17 minute search, the 20-year-old PJ from the 37th ARRS found the injured pilot suffering from a broken pelvis and directed the Huey's pilot to come as close as possible to Modica before lowering the jungle penetrator.

Talley boarded the hoist while providing protection for the injured Modica. With the helicopter in hover, and two men slowly ascending on the rescue hoist, the NVA sprang their trap. The enemy poured heavy groundfire at the exposed and vulnerable helo. Later examination would find 66 enemy bullet holes in the aircraft. The Jolly Green Giant's pilot, U.S. Coast Guard Lt Lance Eagan (an exchange pilot serving



with the 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS) described it in these terms — “Have you ever been to a shooting gallery at the amusement park and wondered what the sitting duck felt like?” Under heavy ground fire with the PJ and pilot on the hoist, Eagan began a vertical climb. When the hoist had barely cleared the tree tops the aircraft commander exited the area with both Modica and Talley still dangling on the rescue cable. At approximately 2,000 feet and some distance from the scene, they were reeled on board the aircraft. Once aboard the helo, Talley administered emergency medical treatment to Modica. For his heroic feats and devotion to duty, Airman Talley was awarded the Air Force Cross on his first combat mission.

Talley would go on to fly 275 more combat sorties during his time in Vietnam. Completing 30 years in the USAF, he retired in 1997 as a CMSgt. Currently he resides in Shalimar, Florida, a nearby neighbor of the Modica family.

### **TSGT VICTOR R. ADAMS**

TSgt Victor Adams was an aerial gunner aboard a UH-1 with the 20<sup>th</sup> Helicopter Squadron at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, when it was shot down near Duc Co, RVN, on November 27, 1968. Despite his own serious injuries, Adams dragged the Huey's unconscious copilot from the wreckage. Adams then made a second trip into the downed helicopter in an attempt to rescue another fellow crewman. On his third attempt, the flames and exploding ammunition inside the Huey were so intense that Adams had to abort further rescue efforts and withdraw.

For his extensive efforts that day, TSgt Adams was awarded the Air Force Cross. After his one-year tour in Vietnam, Adams returned stateside and was assigned to the 1042<sup>nd</sup> Test Squadron at Dover AFB, Delaware. Adams had come home decorated with not only an Air Force Cross, but also the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Purple Heart and an Air Medal with 10 Oak Leaf Clusters.

### **A1C CHARLES D. KING**

On December 25, 1968, A1C Charles D. “Doug” King, a PJ with the 40th ARRS, was aboard an HH-3 that was searching for Major Charles R. Brownlee, a downed pilot in Laos. When the crew spotted the downed flier, King volunteered to descend the 100 feet to the jungle floor. Once on the ground, the Iowa native removed the injured pilot's parachute and dragged him to an area below the hovering helicopter. Nearby, Vietcong troops kept King, Brownlee and the Jolly Green Giant under heavy gunfire. As King was loading Brownlee on the hoist, the enemy gunfire directed at the helicopter became more intense. Suddenly, the former Iowa State student radioed the HH-3's pilot, “I'm hit, I'm hit, pull up, pull up.” At this point the aircraft began receiving fire from directly beneath the helicopter. The pilot immediately initiated a vertical climb out of hover.

The helo crew reluctantly left the 22-year-old airman and the downed pilot (the hoist's cable was severed before Brownlee reached the helicopter) on the ground surrounded by a swarm of hostile forces. On that Christmas day, King's decision to stay behind saved the helicopter and all who were aboard. The helicopter could not have remained airborne in a hover long enough to extract King (had the hoist not been cut), given the amount of enemy fire being directed at the aircraft.

Over the next two days, searches to find King, as well as Brownlee, were unsuccessful. A1C Charles King was awarded the Air Force Cross for this incredibly heroic and selfless act. He was listed as



Missing In Action (MIA) until 1978 when he was officially listed as Killed In Action (KIA). In 1986, a Laotian refugee in the United States reported that he had seen King captured in 1968. In 1993, U.S. officials were allowed into Hanoi's Central Army Museum (where the personal effects of American casualties were kept). They recovered King's I.D. card and an envelope that had Vietnamese writing on it indicating that King had been killed. (NOTE: The fate of Major Charles Brownlee is still unknown.)



*Sgt. Michael Fish (center) is awarded the Air Force Cross by Secretary of the Air Force Robert C. Seamans Jr. (left). Fish stayed on the ground 15 hours in enemy held jungle to treat an injured Huey pilot. C/O USAF*

### **SGT MICHAEL E. FISH**

On February 18, 1969, Sgt Fish was a PJ aboard an HH-43 Huskie from Detachment II of the 38th ARRS that was extracting five crewmembers (and one deceased airman) trapped inside a crashed Huey. The crash site was located 25 miles southwest of Tuy Hoa Air Base, RVN. Fish and Firefighter SSgt Reeves, volunteered to be lowered 100 feet through thick trees to the wreckage area in a canyon. Upon reaching the ground, the two airmen quickly loaded three of the Huey survivors aboard the rescue helicopter by using the hoist. One of these survivors had to have his arms and legs splinted since all his limbs had been broken in the crash. The helo then departed

due to low fuel and the seriously injured casualties. A waiting Army helo took on the fourth survivor who had been rescued from the wreckage by Fish and Reeves along with the body of the deceased crewman. The fifth survivor was the pilot of the UH-1 who could not be pried loose from the wreckage because his foot was trapped. After nearly one hour of unsuccessfully trying to free the foot, Sgt Fish volunteered to remain overnight with this last survivor. The Huskie, with a low fuel status, extracted SSgt Reeves and departed the area.

Fish stayed on the ground all night with the pilot, administering morphine for his injuries and treating him for shock. He also managed to free the pilot's foot. The tension was high as enemy troops searched within 90 feet of the two stranded airmen. Finally, at dawn the next day, after spending 15 hours on the ground, two HH-43s arrived and rescued Fish and his patient. For his courageous and unselfish actions, Sgt Michael Fish received the Air Force Cross. He currently resides in Anchorage, Alaska.

### **TSGT DONALD G. SMITH**

On October 24, 1969, TSgt Smith, a PJ from 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS flying out of Quang Tri, RVN, was aboard an HH-3 that was searching for a downed F-100 Super Sabre crew in Laos. At the site, Smith volunteered to be lowered into the dense jungle. He located the sole survivor of the crashed Super Sabre when suddenly, enemy fire erupted. It was evident that enemy forces had used the downed F-100 crewmen as bait for a "flak trap."

As Smith and the F-100 pilot, who had a broken leg, rode up the rescue hoist together, enemy gunfire shot the hoist assembly from its mounting. The flight engineer, knowing that the hoist was inoperative, sheared the cable, providing the injured pilot and pararescueman with a chance for survival. The severed cable caused the two men to fall 10 to 15 feet to the ground. Both survived the fall, but now Smith was injured as well. Shortly thereafter, enemy fire caused the rescue helicopter to crash-land in a less hostile environment where they were later picked up by another HH-3.



Despite his own injuries, Smith used his radio to direct air strikes against enemy troops in the area to repel enemy probes. He did this only after moving the pilot to a safe area away from the air strikes. Smith's efforts paid off, as the covering fire prevented the estimated 500 North Vietnamese troops from overrunning them. The two men were rescued after spending several hours on the ground, and four additional rescue attempts. For his bravery under fire and skillful actions, TSgt Donald Smith received the Air Force Cross. He retired from the Air Force as a MSgt in 1976 and recently retired from a second career in local and state civil service (primarily in law enforcement and security). He resides near Fairchild Air Force Base in Medical Lake, Washington.

### **SGT THEODORE R. HAMLIN**

On the foggy night of October 25, 1969, Sgt Hamlin was on the ground operating his radio during a Vietcong mortar attack. Despite being wounded by enemy fire, Hamlin continued to use his radio to call in rescue helicopters for his more-seriously wounded companions. Once he established radio contact, he made his way to the landing strip where he helped illuminate the area for the rescue. After helping carry the wounded to the arriving helicopters, the tenacious radio operator refused to leave. Instead, Hamlin stayed at the site the entire night and helped his comrades fight off the North Vietnamese assault. His actions aided in the successful evacuation of seven wounded men and resulted in his being awarded the Air Force Cross.

### **TSGT LEROY M. WRIGHT**

On November 21, 1970, TSgt Leroy Wright was part of an American assault on the Son Tay POW camp near Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam. The helicopter, with Wright on board, made a planned crash-landing in the prison compound. During this landing, Wright badly injured his left foot and ankle. Aware that the mangled helicopter might explode, Wright allowed everyone else on the helicopter to exit the craft before he did. The 38-year-old helicopter mechanic then moved, unaided, to an exposed position where he defended his comrades by firing at enemy troops and assisted the Army combat team to complete their mission successfully. After this firefight and despite his intense pain, Wright moved himself 250 feet to a waiting evacuation helicopter. For his valiant efforts and courage under fire, TSgt Leroy Wright was presented with the Air Force Cross.

### **SSGT CHARLES L. SHAUB**

On April 15, 1972, SSgt Charles Shaub was the loadmaster aboard a C-130 Hercules from the 776<sup>th</sup> Tactical Airlift Squadron, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, RVN. The aircraft was transporting ammunition to American troops fighting for survival at An Loc, RVN. The 8,000 U.S. soldiers based there were surrounded by over 30,000 North Vietnamese troops and ammunition was running dangerously low. The C-130s going in early that morning flew slowly at minimal altitude over their drop zones to ensure accurate air drops. This tactic made the 100-foot-long cargo planes easy targets for enemy ground fire.

Thirty seconds from the drop-zone, Shaub's C-130 was hit with a barrage of enemy gunfire, killing the flight engineer and wounding the copilot and navigator. Much worse, some of the 12 pallets of ammunition aboard the aircraft were smoking after being hit. The pilot hit the "Cargo Release" button, but nothing happened. Sgt Shaub acted quickly and manually cut the pallets' cargo straps. Within seconds, two of the released pallets exploded in mid-air below the C-130. Investigating further, Shaub



discovered more flames in the cargo compartment. The Tennessee native was forced to grab a scalding hot fire extinguisher (which had been exposed to the flaming pallets) to fight the fires. Attempting to shield his hands, he held the extinguisher against his chest and put out two separate fires in the cargo hold. Shaub accomplished this task despite the severe pain he experienced from the burns on his face, hands and neck.

The C-130 approached the landing strip at Tan Son Nhut AB with three of its four engines and landing gear inoperative. Shaub helped the assistant loadmaster, who was somewhat dazed, hand crank the landing gear down.

Capt William "Bill" Caldwell, the C-130's aircraft commander, summarized why SSgt Charles L. Shaub had earned the Air Force Cross for this mission. "The flight engineer, TSgt John Sanders (KIA on the mission) was a great friend of Sgt Shaub, yet Shaub was able to pull his stuff together and do what needed to be done," recalled Capt Caldwell. "Shaub risked his life twice for us — once with the cargo and again by putting out the fire."

### **SGT CHARLES D. MCGRATH**

Sgt Charles "Chuck" McGrath was a PJ aboard an HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant helicopter during a June 27, 1972, mission into North Vietnam to recover Capt Lynn Aikman, a downed F-4 pilot. When the helo arrived in the general vicinity, the pilot was hidden from overhead view by dense jungle. Unable to stand due to a dislocated knee and an injured elbow, Aikman popped a smoke flare. McGrath spotted the smoke and was lowered by hoist. Once on the ground, he searched through the undergrowth until he found the disabled pilot. The helicopter began receiving heavy small arms fire. Aboard the helo, PJ SSgt Chuck Morrow provided McGrath with covering fire using his minigun while A-1 Skyraider aircraft strafed the jungle. Aided by the covering fire, PJ McGrath dragged the injured flier 120 feet to a point where the helicopter could maneuver freely during a hoist extraction. The helo was forced to depart the area when ground fire disabled the rescue hoist. McGrath activated his flare to identify their location to supporting A-1 Skyraiders and the backup helo. When the second HH-53C arrived, McGrath secured the injured pilot to the penetrator and, together, they began the 150 foot extraction amidst constant ground fire directed at the helo. As they reached the helicopter door, Aikman was wounded again, this time in the foot. PJ TSgt Dennis Reich also suffered a gunshot wound while attempting to pull McGrath and his patient into the helo. Hanging from the hoist, McGrath could see a series of holes appearing next to him in the side of the helo. Combat Photographer SSgt Kelly Schuman helped pull McGrath and Aikman in the door as flight engineer SSgt Richard Simon operated the hoist.

Once inside, McGrath worked with Sgt Mike Nunes, the other PJ assigned to the backup helo, to stabilize the wounded. Their efforts were hampered by battle damage to the helicopter medical kit. This was not Sgt McGrath's first performance under fire as he had survived when his helicopter was shot down in northern Laos eleven months earlier. In addition, he had participated in the successful recovery of nine other downed aircrewmembers from Laos and North Vietnam. For his extraordinary heroism during the rescue of Capt Aikman, Sgt Charles D. McGrath was awarded the Air Force Cross. He later earned a college degree, completed Officers Training School as an honor graduate in November, 1979, was commissioned and eventually retired as a Captain in July 1990. He currently resides in Virginia.



## SSGT JON D. HARSTON

On May 15, 1975, SSgt Jon Harston, a flight mechanic, was aboard a CH-53 enroute to a Marine assault landing on Koh Tang island approximately 30 miles off of the Cambodian coast. The Marines were part of an assault team formed to rescue the crew of a captured American merchant ship, the *Mayaguez*. The ship had been seized by the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Armed Forces) three days earlier. These Communist forces had assumed power in Cambodia only weeks before and were not on friendly terms with the U.S.

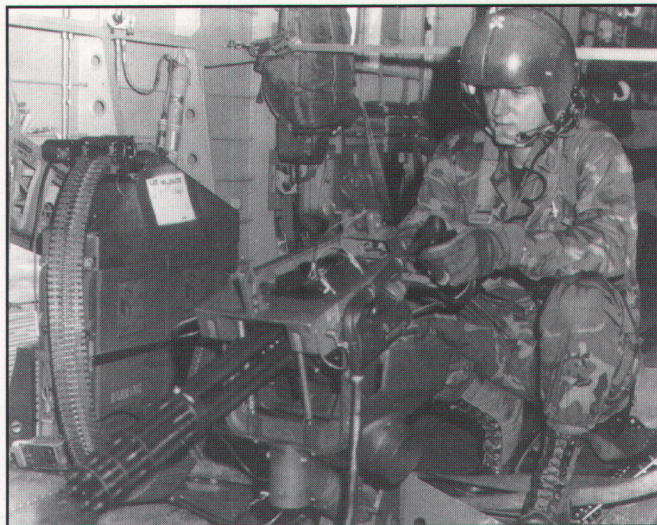
There were seven 40th ARRS HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giants and seven CH-53's from the 21<sup>st</sup> SOS inbound that day. All of the helicopters

came under intense fire as they approached Koh Tang. Inbound at about 40 feet in the air, the helicopter transporting Harston was hit and burst into flames. The damage caused the CH-53 to crash at the shoreline. Harston, a member of the 21<sup>st</sup> SOS, survived the crash. Although suffering from a gunshot wound in his leg and burns on both of his arms and hands, he helped lead fellow survivors, under enemy fire, from the wreckage. With the survivors under constant small arms fire from the beach, Harston reentered the plane to get an M-16 rifle. Once inside the burning wreckage, he found that some Marines were still trapped and led them through the flames to safety. He returned fire but eventually ran out of ammunition. During the firefight he managed to rescue two additional Marines, both suffering from burns to their face and hands. Three CH-53 aircraft were destroyed and 15 men were killed-in-action (13 of them aboard the CH-53 which transported Harston) and three more listed as missing on that horrific day. The mission, however, was considered a success. As a result of America's military determination displayed at Koh Tang Island, the Khmer Rouge government, shortly thereafter, released the 39-man crew of the *Mayaguez* to a Thai fishing crew. They were eventually recovered by the *USS Wilson*. SSgt Harston was the only enlisted person of the four airmen awarded the Air Force Cross for bravery on that day. These airmen were the last to receive the Air Force Cross for service during the Vietnam War era. Harston completed a 26 year career, retiring in 1992 as a Chief Master Sergeant. He currently resides in Shamong, New Jersey, where he works as a KC-10 flight engineer simulator training instructor.

## TSGT TIMOTHY A. WILKINSON

On October 3-4, 1993, U.S. troops were involved in their longest combat action since the end of the Vietnam War. The firefight occurred while attempting to capture a tribal warlord in Mogadishu, Somalia. TSgt Wilkinson, a PJ, was thrust into this 15-hour fight as part of a joint USAF/US Army combat search and rescue team enroute to rescue survivors of a crashed Army UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter.

Arriving at the scene aboard another UH-60, Wilkinson repelled (fast roped) down to the wreckage and began treating the three gunship crewmen while under constant enemy fire. "The fire was coming in



*Sgt Charles McGrath was awarded the Air Force Cross for his rescue of a downed pilot on June 27, 1972. McGrath is seen here aboard an HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant. C/O USAF*



from all directions," stated Wilkinson. "It was constant in that something was flying over your head or hitting in close proximity to you on a fairly regular basis."

The three survivors and Wilkinson, who by now had suffered shrapnel wounds to his face and arms, left the crashed helicopter. As they moved from the crash site, Wilkinson spied U.S. Army Rangers in a gun fight at a street intersection 50 yards away. Wilkinson ran through thick small arms fire to reach three wounded Rangers. Still under fire, the 180-pound airman treated their wounds. When the PJ ran out of medical supplies, the 24<sup>th</sup> Special Tactics Squadron member from Pope AFB, North Carolina, once again, braved bullets and rocket-propelled grenades while returning to the Blackhawk wreckage to retrieve additional medical supplies.



*TSgt Timothy Wilkinson was 1 of 11 USAF Special Operations Command men to take part in the October 3-4, 1993 operations in Mogadishu, Somalia. When Wilkinson was awarded the Air Force Cross for his actions, he became the first enlisted man in 18 years to be so honored.*  
C/O USAF

Wilkinson moved the wounded to a nearby house where he continued to work on them. He remained in the house providing treatment even after the building was hit twice by grenades. This caused a house fire and filled the rooms with toxic fumes. "Technical Sergeant Wilkinson never left the inside of that building because that's where his patients were," recalled fellow airman, SSgt Jeffery Bray. (Bray was awarded the Silver Star on this mission for his gallantry in action). "I walked in for 30 seconds and thought I was going to 'throw up.' That's how bad the fumes were."

By the time TSgt Wilkinson and his comrades were rescued the next morning, the 35-year-old avid outdoorsman had distinguished himself in the eyes of many observers. Lt Col James Oeser, his unit commander, stated, "From the team leader's vantage point, those three Rangers would have died had it not been for the personal courage and decisive actions undertaken by Sgt Wilkinson." When TSgt Timothy Wilkinson was awarded the Air Force Cross, the Pennsylvania native became the first enlisted man in 18 years to be so honored. MSgt Wilkinson is currently assigned to Hurlburt AFB, Florida.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This monograph was written by Sean Miskimins, Staff Curator at the Airmen Memorial Museum (AMM). He is a 1996 graduate of Beloit College, Wisconsin, where he received a B.A. with two majors, History and Anthropology. Mr. Miskimins is the author of several other AMM publications. The editor of For Extraordinary Heroism is William I. Chivalette, MSgt, USAF (Ret.) an award-winning Air Force historian who was formerly the Airmen Memorial Museum's Director of Operations. Mr. Chivalette is the author of numerous monographs and other publications and was the executive editor of the history of the Air Force enlisted force, Unsung Heroes: A History of Enlisted Airmen from the Dawn of Flight to Desert Storm, published in 1997.

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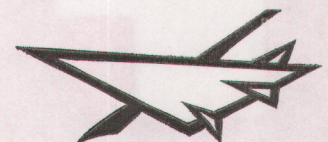


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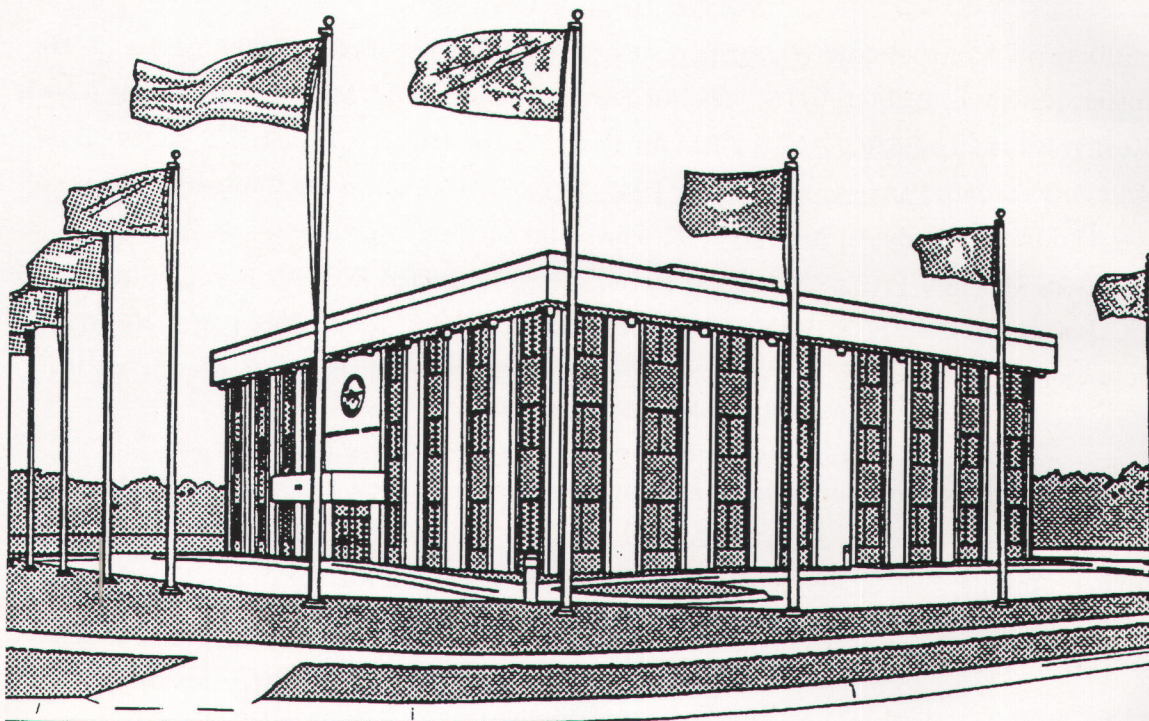


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