



Lieutenant Jack Columbus Rittichier:

“James Dean and Marlon Brando All in One Package”

It was the spring of 1968. What normally would be a season of rebirth was turning out to be a period of gloom, death and foreboding. With the Vietnam War in full swing and with no end in sight, a thoroughly demoralized Lyndon Baines Johnson opted not to seek another term as president of the United States; he announced his decision during a television network broadcast on the evening of March 31. Just days later on April 4, civil rights leader Martin Luther King was assassinated at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. His murder provided the impetus for deadly rioting that began in Washington, D.C. and quickly spread to Baltimore, Chicago and other cities. Meanwhile, with the Vietnam conflict escalating daily, Memorial Day seemed both more meaningful and, at the same time, more hollow than in years past. According to the May 30th editorial of the *Los Angeles Times*, “a Memorial Day commemorated in the midst of a war is particularly deserving of more than pro forma observance. The last few weeks in Vietnam have witnessed the highest death tolls for Americans since our initial involvement in the conflict began seven years ago. . . . We do not know how much longer the struggle in Vietnam will go on, or how it might end. All that seems predictable, if we can use the past as a guide, is that future Memorial Days will, sadly, serve to commemorate many who have yet to give up their lives in their country’s service.”¹

As if the country had not been through enough suffering, just after midnight on June 5, 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, brother of slain President John F. Kennedy, fell to the same fate as his older sibling. While campaigning for the Democratic nomination for president, he too was cut down by an assassin’s bullet. The Ohio daily newspaper, *Akron Beacon Journal*, ran the following headline later that day: “KENNEDY FIGHTING FOR LIFE; SHOT 3 TIMES, SUSPECT HELD.” Bobby Kennedy lost the battle and succumbed on June 6. The nation once again mourned. Undoubtedly, so too did the Rittichier family of Barberton, in Coventry Township, Ohio, an Akron suburb. The Rittichiers were well aware of the political turmoil caused by the Vietnam War, something which the late Senator Kennedy had been thoroughly enmeshed. Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier, a decorated United States Coast Guard aviator and the son of Mr. and Mrs. Carl J. Rittichier, had arrived in Vietnam only a few weeks before Dr. King’s assassination. Jack recently had been assigned as an exchange pilot to the United States

¹*Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1968.

Air Force's 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron based in Da Nang, one of three Coast Guard exchange pilots who had arrived in Vietnam in the spring of 1968. Jack already had distinguished himself as a helicopter rescue pilot when he was awarded the Air Medal for saving lives on the Great Lakes. "The Unknown Force that watched over Jack Rittichier in a dramatic Lake Huron rescue last November undoubtedly will watch over him in Vietnam," wrote reporter Sanford Levinson in an *Akron Beacon Journal* Sunday feature on September 24, 1967. Levinson also noted that "Rittichier has nothing but praise for the Coast Guard, which he joined in 1963."

Jack Columbus Rittichier was born in 1933 and graduated from Coventry High School in 1951. While at Coventry, he was an all-star for the football team and went on to become a standout player for the Kent State University "Golden Flashes" One of Rittichier's Kent State teammates recently recalled, "He was James Dean and Marlon Brando all in one package. When he walked across campus, you noticed him." In fact, Jack was captain of the university's football *and* track teams as well as a cadet officer in Air Force ROTC. One of the highlights of his senior season was when he made a 90-yard touchdown run against rival Bowling Green University that gave the Golden Flashes their first bowl bid, the 1954 "Refrigerator Bowl."² Upon his graduation from Kent in 1955 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, Jack was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Force, where he was trained to fly the B-47 Stratojet and assigned to the Strategic Air Command's 340th Bomber Wing. Not satisfied with just flying training missions, Jack left the Air Force as a captain in 1962, stayed in the reserves for a while, and then joined the Coast Guard so he could really make a difference by flying search and rescue missions.³ His local newspaper took notice. "Lt. Jack Rittichier was a football hero at Coventry High," reported the *Akron Beacon Journal*, "he is a real life hero in the Coast Guard. Soon he is going to Vietnam. A Coast Guardsman in Vietnam? Yep."⁴

By the time of Senator Kennedy's assassination, Lieutenant Rittichier had flown several hair-raising rescue missions in Vietnam in his Sikorsky HH-3E helicopter, nicknamed across the armed forces as the "Jolly Green Giant." Shortly after his arrival "in country," Jack was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for serving as co-pilot on a mission that resulted in the rescue of four U.S. Army crewmen who were pinned down by enemy fire after their helicopter was shot out of the sky. The medal was the first of three DFCs he earned in less than a month after his arrival in Southeast Asia.⁵ At nearly thirty-five years of age, Jack was older and more experienced than the majority of his fellow pilots, and his thinning hair set him apart from many of his comrades. Rittichier could have stayed home and allowed younger men to take the risks,

² "A Hero's Legacy," *Kent State Magazine* (<https://www.kent.edu/magazine/news/heros-legacy> [accessed April 8, 2018]).

³ Mark Inabinett, "Servicemen's Heroism Links Kent State football and Mobile" (cited at http://www.al.com/sports/index.ssf/2013/01/servicemens_heroism_links_kent.html [accessed April 9, 2018]); *News-Journal* (Mansfield, OH), March 29, 1957.

⁴ *Akron Beacon Journal*, Sept. 23, 1967.

⁵ Inabinett, "Serviceman's Heroism."

but that would have been against his nature. “It’s what I have to do,” he told his family and his wife Carol, to whom he had been married for eleven years.⁶

On June 9, 1968, Lieutenant Rittichier and three USAF crewmen took off in their Jolly Green Giant on a mission to rescue a Marine Corps pilot who had been shot down near the Laotian border. The pilot, who sustained a broken arm and leg after ejecting from his aircraft, was used by North Vietnamese soldiers as bait to lure rescue helicopters within range of their weapon systems. The initial USAF rescue chopper on scene, intent on retrieving the pilot, had made three previous attempts to retrieve the downed pilot before breaking contact to refuel. Rittichier, in call sign “Jolly Green-23,” took charge and likewise attempted to retrieve the injured pilot. However, heavy ground fire forced Jack to break contact before he could reach the Marine officer. Meanwhile, helicopter gunships laid suppressive fire on the area to clear it of enemy troops. Despite substantial North Vietnamese resistance, Rittichier again dropped his helicopter into the fray to save the hapless pilot on the ground. While hovering his aircraft above the injured American below and attempting to begin the actual rescue, heavy ground fire struck Jolly Green-23. Rittichier attempted to pull the helicopter back to safety, but it was too heavily damaged. Eyewitnesses later reported that Jack’s aircraft caught fire, attempted to land, and subsequently exploded. Other aircraft flying overhead reported that there were no survivors. In addition to Lieutenant Rittichier, three USAF personnel were killed: Captain Richard C. Yeend, Staff Sergeant Elmer J. Holden and Sergeant James D. Locker⁷ The Marine pilot was never rescued.⁸

Because Akron is on the opposite side of the International Date Line, news of Jack’s demise reached his wife and parents on the same day that he was shot down. A Coast Guard officer was waiting for Jack’s parents at their home on Sunday morning, June 9, when they returned from church services. Later that day, when Jack’s wife Carol was notified, she became so distraught that her doctor gave her a sedative. Sadly, only a week earlier, Jack’s parents received what turned out to be his last letter.⁹

Because Jolly Green-23 crashed in enemy-occupied territory, the remains of the crew were not recovered. Nonetheless, Jack’s family and the Coast Guard planned a funeral service in his memory, which was held on Sunday, June 16 at the Portage Lakes Community Church. A three-man Coast Guard honor guard fired a salute as homage to Lieutenant Rittichier. Donations in Jack’s memory were given to the Coast Guard Welfare Fund. In addition to his parents and

⁶ Molly Kavanaugh, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 7, 2003 (cited at <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jcrittichier.htm> [accessed April 9, 2018]).

⁷ “Casualty Data Report: Case 1206,” Rittichier File, USCG Historian’s Office.

⁸ C. Douglas Kroll, *A Coast Guardsman’s History of the United States Coast Guard* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 40.

⁹ *Akron Beacon Journal*, June 10, 1968.

wife, Jack was survived by two brothers, Henry and David.¹⁰ Lieutenant Jack C. Rittichier was gone and his mortal remains seeming were lost forever, but his memory endured.

Less than two months after Jack's death, his Coast Guard and Air Force comrades in Vietnam dedicated a memorial bell in Jack's memory for the chapel at Da Nang Air Base where the Jolly Green-23 crew was stationed.¹¹ A year after Lt. Rittichier was shot down, Admiral William F. Rea III, commander of the Ninth Coast Guard District, presented seven of Jack's medals to Carol Rittichier: the Silver Star, three DFCs and three Air Medals. About the same time, a hangar at Michigan's Selfridge Air Force Base, home of USCG Air Station Detroit—where Jack was stationed before being posted to Vietnam—was renamed in Jack's memory.¹² Then, in November 1998, more than twenty years after Jolly Green-23 was shot down, the U.S. Coast Guard's Integrated Support Command, Portsmouth, VA, dedicated an administrative building in memory of Lieutenant Rittichier.¹³ Jack and his crew also were remembered on the Walls of the Missing at the Honolulu Memorial within the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, and on Panel 58W of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.¹⁴

The Vietnam War lasted another seven years after Jack and his Air Force crew were killed. By the time of the complete American withdrawal from Vietnam in the spring of 1975, more than 58,000 Americans had died in the conflict. Searches for American prisoners-of-war [POW] and those personnel still missing-in-action [MIA] began as early as February 1973, but efforts came to a complete halt with the communist takeover of South Vietnam in April 1975. The United States resumed recovery of its MIAs in 1988 in the countries of Vietnam and Laos, and likewise in Cambodia in 1991. Large-scale field operations to recover American remains began in 1992. According to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, teams of trained personnel “have interviewed thousands of witnesses and conducted archival research in all three countries regarding the fate of missing Americans, resulting in the discovery of crash and burial sites across the region. Archeologists and anthropologists use meticulous site exploitation to find remains and material evidence, followed by a forensic process that often leads to the identification of our missing service members.”¹⁵ These efforts led to the discovery of Jolly Green-23's crash site in 2002. The remains were positively identified soon after their repatriation in early 2003 to the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii.¹⁶

¹⁰ Ibid., June 13, 17 & 30, 1968.

¹¹ Ibid., Aug. 9, 1968.

¹² *News-Journal* (Mansfield, OH), June 30, 1969; *Traverse City [MI] Record-Eagle*, June 14, 1969.

¹³ Program for the Lieutenant Hack Columbus Rittichier Building Dedication, Nov. 10, 1998. Rittichier File, USCG Historian's Office.

¹⁴ Website of the American Battle Monuments Commission (<https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/americas/honolulu-memorial#.WuIfpNiWydJ> [accessed April 26, 2018]).

¹⁵ Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, “Vietnam” (<http://www.dpaa.mil/Our-Missing/Vietnam-War/> [accessed April 26, 2018]).

¹⁶ “Casualty Data Report: Case 1206,” Rittichier File, USCG Historian's Office.

Jack's surviving remains finally were laid to rest with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery on October 6, 2003, more than thirty-five years after that fatal day in June 1968. David Rittichier, his brother, remarked after the funeral, "I know what he would have said if he were here today: 'I'm no hero. It's my job.'"¹⁷ As a testament to Jack's courage and tenacity, in 2009 the Kent State University football team named its Most Valuable Player award the "Lt. Jack Columbus Rittichier Award" and dedicated, at Dix Stadium, the Lt. Jack Rittichier monument.¹⁸

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¹⁷ "MIA airman laid to rest after 35 years," *Daily News* (New York), Oct. 7, 2003.

¹⁸ PA1 John Masson, USCGR, "Kent State Honors Fallen Coast Guard Aviator," Coast Guard Great Lakes: Official Blog of the 9th Coast Guard District (<http://greatlakes.coastguard.dodlive.mil/2009/09/kent-state-honors-fallen-coast-guard-aviator/> accessed April 26, 2018).