

# 1967: Coast Guard-Air Force Exchange Program

*“The helicopter envisioned by CDR Frank Erickson as a vehicle for rescue also became a weapon of war. But its fame in battle as a lifesaver all but eclipsed that of its warrior cousin.”*

Historian and retired Lieutenant Commander Barrett Thomas Beard



As US involvement in the war in Vietnam grew, so did Coast Guard involvement. Most of those assigned to duty in Vietnam were part of Operation Market Time, a naval interdiction campaign. However, the rapid increase in rescue requirements generated by direct involvement of US forces created an acute shortage of helicopter pilots experienced in Search and Rescue. At the beginning of 1966, the Air Force's Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service approached the Coast Guard suggesting a reciprocal exchange program of experienced aviators. From more than eighty volunteers, three

helicopter pilots were chosen. LCDR Lonnie Mixon, LT Lance Eagan, and LT Jack. A. Rittichier joined the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron in Da Nang, flying the Sikorsky HH-3E “Jolly Green Giant.” By 1971, ten USCG helicopter pilots participated in the program. Their numbers were not large. Their contribution was. This group of men were awarded 4 Silver Stars, 15 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and 86 Air Medals. One, however, did not return.

LT Jack Rittichier, a former Air Force B-47 pilot, received his first DFC eleven days after his arrival in Vietnam. A month later, he twice entered an “extremely hostile” landing zone to rescue nine survivors of a downed helicopter. Rittichier was awarded a second DFC. Less than a month later, the 37th AARS attempted to rescue an injured Marine fighter pilot. Rittichier was flying the back up helicopter. After the primary aircraft was “severely damaged” from heavy ground fire, and low on fuel, Rittichier attempted the rescue. His first pass too, was met with heavy enemy fire. He returned a second time to pick up the downed Marine. As he began to lower the hoist cable a forward air control aircraft reported his left side was afire. Rittichier flew some two hundred yards to an open area before the helicopter burst into flames and hit the ground. Low flybys reported no survivors in sight. Rittichier was officially listed as Missing in Action. He and his crew were awarded Silver Stars. In January 2003, LT Jack Rittichier's remains were finally recovered. On 6 October, he was laid to rest on Coast Guard Hill in Arlington National Cemetery.



