

Bank Shot

Lt. Jim Fleming had to win his desperate gamble, or the Army Special Forces team was doomed.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

BELL'S UH-1F light utility helicopter was designed to move people and things among SAC's missile sites—not to penetrate an enemy field of fire in the jungles of Southeast Asia. But, as in so many cases, Vietnam made a virtue of necessity; Air Force UH-1s went to war. On November 26, 1968, twenty-four-year-old Lt. James P. Fleming, assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Ban Me Thuot, flew into the annals of Air Force history at the controls of one of those vulnerable, virtually defenseless birds.

Earlier that day a six-man reconnaissance team of Army Special Forces Green Berets had been lifted into Vietnam's western highlands, near the Cambodian border and about thirty miles west of Pleiku. A few hours later, they found themselves with their backs to a river and penned in on three sides by enemy forces. The team leader's call for immediate evacuation was picked up by an Air Force FAC and by a flight of five UH-1s—three transports and two gunships—on their way to a refueling stop at the end of a four-hour mission. Lieutenant Fleming flew one of the transports with Maj. Paul McClellan in the right seat. All five choppers, despite low fuel, headed for the recon team, where the FAC, Maj. Charles Anonson, briefed them on the situation.

The Special Forces men were taking fire from six heavy machine guns and an undetermined number of enemy troops. There was a clearing in the jungle about 100 yards

from them—too distant to be reached through the dense undergrowth—and a smaller one only twenty-five yards away. As soon as the choppers sighted the team's smoke, the gunships opened fire, knocking out two machine-gun positions. One gunship was hit and crash-landed across the river. Its crew was picked up by one of the transports. A second transport, critically low on fuel, had to pull out, reducing the rescue force to Fleming and one gunship—piloted by Maj. Leonard Gonzales—that was almost out of ammunition.

At treetop height, Fleming checked out the smaller clearing and found it impossible to land there. Then he had an idea. If he hovered just above the river with his landing skids against the bank—a maneuver that called for considerable piloting skill, especially in the midst of a firefight—maybe the Green Berets could make the few yards to his chopper. And maybe, by some miracle, his hovering bird wouldn't be shot down. After what must have seemed an eternity to Fleming and his crew, suspended motionless against the river bank, the recon team radio man, who was

barely audible above the gunfire, reported there was no way they could survive a dash to the helicopter. Fleming hastily backed his chopper over the river and flew out of range through a hail of bullets.

The FAC then directed the Green Berets to detonate their Claymore mines as Jim Fleming came back to the bank for what they all knew was a last, desperate attempt at rescue.

While Major Gonzales fired the last of his ammunition, Fleming descended again into what he described as the "heaviest hostile fire I had ever seen." This time the enemy, knowing exactly where he would be, concentrated their fire on the pickup point. Fleming knew that the chance of survival for his crew and for the recon team was slim indeed.

As the Claymore mines went off, the six Green Berets ran for Fleming's UH-1, killing three Viet Cong only ten yards from the chopper. With bullets whistling all around, Sgts. Fred Cook and Paul Johnson hauled the Army troops aboard as Jim Fleming, unmindful of enemy fire crashing through his windshield, held the chopper steady just above the water. Fleming once more backed the helicopter away from the bank and flew down the river to safety.

What was Fleming thinking when he flew a second time into that curtain of fire? "Frankly," he recalls, "I was scared to death." But valor is the mastery of fear, not the absence of it.

In a ceremony at the White House on May 14, 1970, President Richard Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to Jim Fleming. Today, Fleming, now a lieutenant colonel, is a member of the Officer Training School staff at Lackland AFB, Tex. The young men and women starting an Air Force career at Lackland have Jim Fleming as a symbol of courage and character, the backbone of any fighting force. ■



Jim Fleming won his Medal of Honor in Vietnam in November 1968 in a helicopter rescue.