

A Hillside Near Khe Sanh

The severely injured HH-3E pilot laid his life on the line to save a rescue force from disaster.

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SHORTLY after midnight on November 9, 1967, Capt. Gerald O. Young, an instructor pilot with the 37th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Danang, headed his HH-3E Jolly Green Giant toward an area southwest of Khe Sanh. Low-hanging clouds shrouded 5,000-foot peaks off to his left. Visibility was poor. It wasn't a good night for a rescue mission in the hill country just below the DMZ, but Captain Young was a veteran of fifty-nine combat missions, including as far north as Haiphong. He and his crew had volunteered for this one.

The previous afternoon, a small US-South Vietnamese reconnaissance team had been surrounded by a NVA battalion. Two helicopters had been shot down during a daylight rescue attempt. Young and his crew were flying backup for another Jolly Green, supported by a C-130 flareship and three Army gunships, in a desperate attempt to save the ambushed patrol.

As the rescue force approached the beleaguered team, the enemy opened up with automatic weapons on the escorting gunships. The primary HH-3E moved through heavy fire into the area, now lighted by flares from the C-130. Hovering along a steep slope, its crew picked up three survivors before they were forced to withdraw to an emergency landing area, badly shot up and leaking fuel and oil. The pilot advised Young not to make another attempt under such extremely difficult conditions. Nevertheless, Young decided on one more try, even though the gunships were low on fuel and ammunition and might not be able to stay with them,

Captain Young approached the slope head-on, hovering with one main wheel on the ground and his rotor blades barely clearing the bank above him. His copilot, Capt. Ralph Brower, directed fire from the gunships while Sgt. Larry Mansey leaped to the ground to help the wounded aboard, covered by SSgt. Eugene Clay at one of the chopper's machine guns. The big bird was sprayed by automatic weapons fire while five survivors were pulled aboard. During takeoff, a direct hit exploded one of the Jolly Green's engines, flipping the craft over on its back as it burst into flames and crashed down the hillside.

Young, hanging upside down in his harness, finally escaped through the broken windshield, his clothing on fire. He rolled down the slope to extinguish the flames, which had inflicted second- and third-degree burns on his legs, back, arms, and neck. Then, with his bare hands, he smothered the flames that were consuming a soldier lying nearby who had been thrown clear of the wreckage. Were there other survivors in or near the burning wreck? Young crawled 100 yards up the hill toward the flames, but was driven back by intense heat and enemy fire.

Gerald Young knew that daylight would bring a rescue force looking for survivors. The first A-1E Sandys to arrive spotted him and the



Capt. Gerald O. Young; honored for valor in Vietnam in 1967.

unconscious man he had rescued. Young tried to warn them of a possible flak trap. He knew that the main rescue force would arrive at any moment and that enemy troops were moving back into the area to oppose them. The only way he could help was by leading the hostiles away from the crash site. In his condition, that meant almost certain capture or death.

He hid the wounded man whom he had rescued earlier and, despite the agony of his burns, took off into the brush, with enemy troops in pursuit. Each step ahead in the long hours of flight was a triumph of will over searing pain as he lured his pursuers farther and farther from the wreckage. After stumbling and crawling for six miles, he eluded the NVA troops late that afternoon, seventeen hours after the crash, and called in a helicopter to pick him up. A rescue force had finally been able to land at the crash site, retrieve one survivor, and recover the bodies of the dead, including that of the man Gerald Young had hidden.

Captain Young spent six months in hospitals, recovering from his burns. In May 1968, he was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Lyndon Johnson at a ceremony dedicating the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes.

Before retiring as a lieutenant colonel in 1980, Gerald Young served at the Air Force Academy, was instrumental in setting up the forerunner of the Air Force Mast Program (which provides helicopter assistance to civilian highway patrols), flew with the VIP transport squadron out of Andrews AFB, Md., and was Air Attaché to Colombia.

Today, eighteen years after his last combat mission, how does he feel about his Vietnam experience? "The air rescue mission was one of the best in the war," he says. "There is no greater compensation than to participate in saving lives."

By that standard, Gerald Young is a wealthy man indeed. ■