

Deliverance at Kham Duc

With skill and courage and aided by a series of miracles, Joe Jackson pulled off one of the most daring rescues of the Vietnam War.

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ALUMBERING, unarmed Fairchild C-123 transport is not exactly the aircraft a pilot would choose for a rescue attempt on an enemy-held airstrip—especially a pilot like Lt. Col. Joe Jackson, who had twenty years in fighters and U-2 reconnaissance planes. As a matter of fact, it's hard to think of any bird that would have made such a venture attractive, but that's exactly what Joe Jackson, in the left seat of C-123 No. 542, was about to undertake.

On May 12, 1968, Jackson and his crew—Maj. Jesse Campbell, TSgt. Edward Trejo, and SSgt. Manson Grubbs—had been on a normal trash-hauling run combined with an annual proficiency check when they were recalled to their base at Danang. A Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, about forty-five miles to the southwest, had been under siege for three days. C-123s and C-130s were frantically evacuating some 1,000 troops from the surrounded camp. Joe Jackson was dispatched to help.

As he orbited at 9,000 feet in a holding pattern, the scene below was one of increasing devastation as the Viet Cong moved closer to the camp's 4,000-foot airstrip. Through the marginal and rapidly deteriorating weather, Jackson could see fires, exploding ammunition dumps, and wrecked aircraft lying just off the runway. The strip itself was littered with debris and blocked at midpoint by a burning helicopter. There were enemy gun positions a few hundred feet beyond the chopper.

The thought of flying into that grisly scene in a slow-moving C-123 that even an entry-level gunner should be able to hit was not one to gladden the heart. Then the future brightened, though only briefly. Word came that the last Special Forces survivors had been evacuated. Time to head for home—until it was discovered moments later that a three-man combat control team had been overlooked. They were somewhere near the runway, but could not be contacted by radio.

The airborne command post asked a C-123 ahead of Jackson to attempt a pickup. Supported by friendly fighters, the C-123 pilot went in under fire, failed to locate the control team, and firewalled his throttles. Just as he lifted off, the men were spotted in a ditch near the burning helicopter, but it was too late to stop. The C-123, low on fuel, returned to its base.

"Would No. 542 make a last try to rescue the team?" Without hesitation, fighter pilot Jackson peeled off from 9,000 feet in a most unconventional approach for a transport—a steep dive with full flaps to reduce

exposure to enemy fire. Somehow, though he exceeded flaps-down speed by a wide margin, the flaps held. A minor miracle.

Jackson leveled off just above the treetops, touched down at the end of the strip, and stood on the brakes. He couldn't reverse props, since that would automatically cut off the two small auxiliary jet engines hung on the wings. He would need them for takeoff, if skill and good fortune got them that far.

No. 542 skidded to a stop just short of the burning helicopter. Jackson swung his aircraft around, preparing for an emergency takeoff, as the three controllers dashed across the runway and were hauled aboard. As he looked down the 2,200 feet of debris-littered strip, he had an unpleasant surprise. Coming toward 542 was a 122-mm rocket, fired at zero elevation. It skidded off the runway, came to rest ten yards from the plane, and failed to explode. A major miracle.

Ten seconds after Jackson's plane began to roll, a barrage of mortar shells hit where he had stopped to pick up the team. Ahead, the runway was crisscrossed by tracers fired from both sides. No one aboard No. 542 expected to make it, but of the thousands of rounds fired at the C-123, not one found its mark. A supreme miracle.

At 1730 hours that day, two hours after he had entered his holding pattern near the camp, Joe Jackson, his crew, and the three rescued men landed safely at Danang.

On January 16, 1969, in one of his last acts before leaving the White House, President Lyndon Johnson presented the Medal of Honor to the pilot of No. 542. Along with his own skill and valor, Joe Jackson must have had a second Copilot when he volunteered for that desperate attempt to save three abandoned men, but he had no way of knowing that when he dropped his flaps and started a screaming, vibrating dive toward seemingly certain disaster. ■



Lt. Col. Joe Jackson became the fifth Air Force man to win the Medal of Honor in Vietnam when he used a C-123 to rescue a combat control team at Kham Duc.