

A Triumph of Will

The cockpit was in flames, but Bill Jones would not yield until his job was done.

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By 1967, the US had been at war in Southeast Asia, at first covertly then overtly, for a decade. It was a strange war conducted under a strategy of "gradualism," run by civilian theorists, and masterminded by a Secretary of Defense whose middle name was Strange.

At home, it was business as usual, with little increase in Air Force budgets, a declining aircraft inventory, and a shortage of young pilots—a result of peacetime training quotas and aircraft losses in the war zone that were approaching 1,000. More than 2,500 older pilots had to be returned to the cockpit.

Among the more venerable SEA pilots was forty-six-year-old Lt. Col. William A. Jones III, a West Pointer whose earlier experience had been in SAC bombers and troop-carrier aircraft. Now he was commanding the 602d Special Operations Squadron, based at Nakhom Phanom in northeast Thailand and equipped with World War II-vintage A-1 Skyraiders, popularly known as Spads.

Early in the morning of September 1, 1968, Bill Jones took off on his ninety-eighth combat mission, leading a flight of four A-1s that was assigned the task of locating an F-4 pilot who had been shot down somewhere northwest of Dong Hoi in North Vietnam. Colonel Jones was on-scene commander for the rescue effort. As usual during the monsoon season, the weather was bad—poor visibility and clouds that blanketed the tops of hills in the search area. Jones sent two of his A-1s into high orbit while he and his wingman, Capt. Paul Meeks, spent an hour flying a low search pattern over an

area where the downed pilot, Carter 02 Alpha, was reported to be hiding.

Finally, an F-100 pilot made contact with the survivor several miles to the east, in territory well defended by 37-mm guns and automatic weapons. Now Carter 02 Alpha had to be pinpointed and the guns silenced so a chopper could come in for the pickup. As Colonel Jones made repeated low passes over the area, his A-1 was shaken by a violent explosion, apparently from a shell that detonated just below his Spad. He regained control, decided the plane was still flyable, and continued the search until he was rewarded by a call from the downed man, who reported that an A-1 was directly over him. Almost simultaneously, Jones came under attack from an AA gun that fired down on him from the top of a hill. The gun was too close to the F-4 pilot to risk calling in fighters, so Bill Jones attacked with rockets and his four 20-mm cannon.

On his second pass, Colonel Jones's A-1 was stitched with automatic weapons fire that ignited the rocket motor of his ejection seat. The blast of flame seared his neck, face, arms, and hands. Heading for a clear area, he tried, despite excruciating pain, to report the whereabouts of Carter 02 Alpha. His calls were blocked; then his transmitter went dead. There was nothing to do but eject or be consumed by the fire.



Col. William A. Jones III was an A-1 pilot in Vietnam in 1968.

He pulled the ejection handle that jettisoned his canopy, but "nothing else happened," except that the rush of air intensified the flames.

As he prepared to go over the side, the fire began to die down, and Bill Jones decided not to bail out. He would return to Nakhom Phanom if he could and report the location of the pilot and enemy guns. His flight instruments were useless, most of the windscreen gone, his eyes swelling shut, the pain—especially in his hands—almost unbearable, and the weather deteriorating. His only chance was to tuck into his wingman and follow him home. The flight to NKP took forty tortured minutes, ending with manual extension of the landing gear and a no-flap GCA approach through heavy overcast and turbulence.

When Jones was lifted from the blackened cockpit, his hands looking "like mozzarella cheese," he refused a sedative until he had described the precise location of the F-4 pilot and the enemy guns. Later that day, Carter 02 Alpha was rescued.

On recovering from his burns, Bill Jones, who was to be awarded the Medal of Honor, was assigned to duty at Andrews AFB, Md., and promoted to colonel on November 1, 1969. In a supreme irony, Colonel Jones, who had survived more than twenty years of flying high-performance aircraft and nearly 100 combat missions, was killed in the crash of his private plane before the presentation ceremony could be held. President Nixon presented the medal posthumously to Colonel Jones's widow and three young daughters.

After the ceremony, Bill Jones's youngest daughter, nine-year-old Mary Lee, gave the President a copy of her father's book, *Maxims for Men-at-Arms*, illustrated with his own pen-and-ink drawings. Colonel Jones had received the first copy of the book the day before his death. ■